

Panel eyes county's operations

By Alexa Zoellner Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, August 27, 2015 8:19 am

JEFFERSON — A task force on Jefferson County operations and organization met for the last time Wednesday to prepare for its final report to the County Board of Supervisors on Sept. 8.

The first meeting of the panel, created by the Jefferson County Board last November, was held Jan. 14, and since then the task force has met twice a month.

The purpose of the task force, county board Chairperson Jim Schroeder explained after a July 24 meeting, is to look at ways operations in Jefferson County can be sustained while still providing the services that are mandated formally or by the public.

“If we keep doing things the way we’re doing them, it’s not sustainable,” Schroeder said. “In order to make them sustainable, we need to do some combination of finding efficiencies or restructuring county government.”

What makes that difficult, according to task force Chairperson Jennifer Hanneman, is that Jefferson County is in a good place financially when compared to other counties.

“It becomes a bigger problem for us,” Hanneman said following Wednesday’s meeting. “There’s not easy things that we can cut to get to where we need to be in the future. We’ve basically trimmed a lot of the fat already, so a lot of it is efficiencies.”

There are three areas of emphasis within the task force’s final report: the financial/budget condition of the county, staff/work environment, and structure and governance.

In the financial/budget condition of the county, there are seven actions planned, the first two of which — continuous quality improvement and smart growth/economics — already are in progress.

The other five actions include county farmland, fund balance policy, alternate revenue sources, transportation plans and developing priority-based budgeting.

In staff/work environment there are nine actions: reviewing human resource policy and operations countywide in six areas, technology ERP, technology security, technology long-term plan, human resources training, human resources recruitment and retainage, human resources succession planning, facilities and fleet management.

The six areas within reviewing human resource policy and operations countywide are an analysis of overtime and sick time utilization, non-monetary incentives, structure and status of staff, benefit and compensation studies, market studies, and classification study review.

Within the structure and governance area are seven actions. The first, to develop a council of governments, is in progress.

Also in the area are the communication with state agencies and state Legislature, committee structure, county board size, strategic plan update, strategic plan action plan/implementation and department structure/operation organization.

More information regarding the outcome goals, responsible parties, reporting entities and target dates are available online at www.jeffersoncountywi.gov under county board agendas and minutes.

Schroeder explained what the task force hopes the county board gets out of the report.

“We hope that the entire board, first of all, understands the scope of the situation that the county is in financially and what we predict it will be in the coming years,” Schroeder said. “Then that will feed into, ‘these are thing things that we specifically need to look at to address those challenges.’ (The report) is going to help focus the work of these committees, and in some cases special work groups, for the next year, two years and beyond.”

No action other than possible acceptance of the recommendations will take place at the next county board meeting in regard to the task force's report.

“We talked a lot about working groups or committees and boards,” County Administrator Ben Wehmeier said. “So a lot of (the tasks detailed in the report) will be assigned to those folks because they deal with the help on policy and standpoint on a day-to-day basis. So partly what's happening with the task force recommendations to the county board is to ask those committees to specifically look at these areas of policy or operations.”

Policy issues would be dealt with mainly by elected officials within the county board committees. Operations would be geared more toward department heads and other staff within those departments.

Hanneman and Wehmeier will present the report to the county board.

Over the next few months a full outline on actions by the task force will be developed.

“It'll be background,” Wehmeier said. “It will show what the task force did, the reports we reviewed, look at all the data that we were asked to collect — so it's all in one place.”