

County review outlined

By Alexa Zoellner Union staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, September 9, 2015 8:40 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday heard the findings of a taskforce study of county operations and organizations.

Members of the taskforce included Jefferson County Supervisors Jennifer Hanneman, George Jaeckel, Russell Kutz, Steve Nass and Jim Schroeder; Jefferson County District Attorney Sue Happ; citizens Timothy Smith and Ron Krueger; Jefferson County Parks Department director Joe Nehmer; Jefferson County Human Services director Kathi Cauley, and Jefferson County Administrator Benjamin Wehmeier.

The presentation during the board’s monthly meeting was given by Wehmeier and Hanneman, taskforce chairperson. They spoke about the state of Jefferson County, the taskforce’s mission, education the taskforce members underwent, and their recommendation process, action plan and the next steps.

“Jefferson County, like other municipalities, is in a situation where we have rising expenditures and fairly steady revenues,” Hanneman said. “Over time, we see that’s going to be a bigger problem for us. So the goal of the taskforce was to come up with a sustainable solution to maintain our current levels of services as a county.”

Hanneman explained that the first thing the taskforce looked at was, “who are we as Jefferson County?”

“It’s pretty amazing if you think about it,” Hanneman said. “We are a \$70 million corporation with 550 employees that carry out missions in 27 departments across 85,000 shareholders. We have clinics, law firms, engineering companies, health services — we do a lot of different things in a lot of different areas. When you look at the county as a whole, there’s a lot to look at.”



TASKFORCE REPORT

TASKFORCE REPORT — A Taskforce on County Operations and Organization first began meeting in mid-January. On Tuesday, it presented its findings to the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors. Seen above are County Administrator Ben Wehmeier and Jefferson County Supervisor Jennifer Hanneman, taskforce chairperson, as they present the task force’s findings to the board. Related story appears on A1. — Daily Union photo by Alexa Zoellner.

Jefferson County's revenues include \$210,000 in new growth and \$200,000 in sales taxes, she noted.

"That sounds good because we get some increased revenues in," Hanneman said. "But you also have to look at our Step Program, cost-of-living adjustments and health-insurance increases on the expenditures."

The Step Program provides a 2.5-percent increase in wages, about \$600,000 a year, the cost-of-living adjustment at 1 percent costs \$247,000 a year and health insurance typically increases by 7 percent.

"There's a gap (between revenues and expenses)," Hanneman said. "That gap is going to continue to increase, and that was one of the things the taskforce was charged with — to figure out how we can make that gap smaller and how do we fill it going forward."

Hanneman and Wehmeier then covered the various challenges and opportunities available to the county, including succession planning, state and federal budget, forward leaning staff, technology needs, location and new and existing relationships.

"Basically what we're saying is there's no magic bullet out there," Hanneman explained. "There's not someplace we can look and say, 'oh, here's a million-dollars saving every year.' There's a lot of different things we need to look at."

When it came to Jefferson County's long-term outlook, the taskforce was impressed, she said, adding that the county is in a good financial position, has limited debt and a solid fund balance, all liabilities are funded and there is a solid bond rating.

"Going forward, we need to look at ways that we can compensate our employees in such a way that we recruit and retain employees," Hanneman said. "Our employees are our most important asset and we need to make sure that we're treating them right and treating them fairly so that they want to stick around."

Hanneman said that within technology, the county needs to look at infrastructure and investment and, within capital, how to fund and prioritize it going forward.

The taskforce's education began by looking at five audits of different departments — highway, human services, MIS operations, sheriff and administrative services — that had been completed. "So we thought why don't we look at the audits and the recommendations made and how they were working out," Hanneman said. "We were pretty impressed with the recommendations. The ones that weren't made were pretty much for financial reasons."

The taskforce also reviewed the county's strategic plan, comprehensive plan and the county farm master plans. The group heard presentations on the economic impact of agriculture in the county,

an analysis of historical and projected growth/economic condition analysis, highway work rules analysis and a review of the three- to five-year financial outlooks based on projected revenue versus expenditures.

An analysis of all the information revealed three areas of emphasis within the county: the financial/budget condition of the county, staff/work environment and structure and governance.

In the financial/budget condition, Hanneman said, there are seven actions planned: continuous quality improvement, smart growth/economics, county farmland, fund balance policy, alternate revenue sources, transportation plan and developing priority based budgeting.

Continuous quality improvement and transportation plan were two areas on which the panel heavily focused.

“There are some departments that are doing a really good job implementing continuous quality improvement on a day-to-day basis,” Hanneman said. “What we’d like to see is this carried over to all the departments and all the employees in Jefferson County. It may create financial savings, but what it (also) does is create efficiencies and a better way of looking at your job.”

There is a work group in place for the continuous quality improvement, the board was informed.

“We’ve got some ways to go,” Wehmeier said. “A lot of it is education with our staff ... and that’s employees, not just department heads. Long term, we’ll keep training going, but we eventually want to make it an ongoing process with each department.”

He said that when looking at the transportation within Jefferson County, the taskforce realized it is a “big issue” that needs to be addressed.

“I think the biggest thing short term is how we help the workforce from a development standpoint,” Wehmeier said. “How do we get folks to supportive jobs (because that’s something we’ve heard from within our municipalities).

A working group has been set up to deal with the transportation plan and the topic will be part of the county’s comprehensive plan update.

In staff/work environment, nine actions were listed: reviewing human resource policy and operations county wide 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 sicktime utilization, non-monetary incentives, structure and status of staff, benefit and compensation studies, market studies, and classification study review.

“This was a lot of discussion topics that was, in general, personnel,” Wehmeier said. “The conclusion on those was there’s a lot more work that has to be done on a department-by-department basis. This comes back to the continuous quality-improvement process that we’d like to integrate to help look at what does and doesn’t make sense in departments — looking at numerous costs and finding the most efficient way to get the job done.”

With human resources succession planning, the issue comes from a number of department heads that will be retiring in the future and the need to make sure that the county is adequately preparing for the loss of that experience and knowledge the county administrator noted.

“This ties directly to the challenge of succession planning and training,” Wehmeier said. “We say ‘training’ and it’s not just going to conferences or a yearly thing that employees do on an ongoing basis. This is something that needs professional development that enhances what is going on.”

Part of the recommendation includes setting aside \$7,500 for staff training opportunities.

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

“This will include a representative from each local government in Jefferson County,” Hanneman said. “Our hope is to get this going this fall so that we can talk about them in ways that we can partner so that we’re not duplicating efforts and also are possibly reducing expenditures.”

Wehmeier explained that some of the key issues that came up were transportation, zoning, growth, economic development and shared services.

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

“We feel that county board size is something we need to take a look at and see if 30 is the correct size,” Hanneman said. “There are varying opinions that are all over the board on this one. We realize we can’t make any changes before the next election. We just don’t have enough time — it’s a long process — but it’s something that we want to start looking at.”

More information regarding the outcome goals, responsible parties, reporting entities, target dates/status and near-, mid- and long-term goals are available online at www.jeffersoncountywi.gov under county board agendas and minutes.

“Several of our recommendations have been or will be referred to working groups,” Hanneman said. “They’ll have people and or committees that they are responsible and reporting to and so what we want to do is make sure this keeps moving and that we keep following up on it. I think

the administration and rules committee will ultimately oversee the implementation of the whole plan.”

A final report with detailed information of everything the taskforce reviewed, talked about and decided is to be prepared after budget season

After the presentation, Supervisor Dwayne Morris asked whether the taskforce had a way to prioritize the goals.

“All of these recommendations are pretty much immediately going to be referred to a committee or a special working group,” Schroeder said. “In that sense, they will all be number one priorities. This presentation is meant to focus the work of the committees and work groups going forward.”

Schroeder said after the presentation that he believes it went well.

“We knew going in that there’s not a million dollars under a rock somewhere for us to address the challenges we have,” he said. “Jefferson County is already well-run; we’re in a good financial position. What we really need to do is have ongoing culture change, create efficiencies and that’s why you see the kinds of recommendations you do.”