

The Executive Summary

One of the things I discovered when I ran for county executive is that a lot of people don't know what this position actually does. So, before I got too far into this educational writing project I thought it would make sense to give you some insight into what, exactly, I do.

State statutes provide the nuts and bolts of the job description (Wis. Stat. s. 59.17), and you might be surprised to know that a county executive isn't required by law unless your county population is over 750,000. The main aspects of the job are covered in Wis. Stat. s. 59.17(5)(6):

“(5) MESSAGE TO THE BOARD; SUBMISSION OF ANNUAL BUDGET. The county executive shall annually, and otherwise as may be necessary, communicate to the board the condition of the county, and shall recommend such matters to the board for its consideration as he or she considers expedient. Notwithstanding any other provision of the law, he or she shall be responsible for the submission of the annual budget to the board and may exercise the power to veto any increases or decreases in the budget under sub. (6).

“(6) COUNTY EXECUTIVE TO APPROVE OR VETO RESOLUTIONS OR ORDINANCES; PROCEEDINGS ON VETO. Every resolution adopted or ordinance enacted by the board shall, before it becomes effective, be presented to the county executive. If the county executive approves, the county executive shall sign it; if not, the county executive shall return it with his or her objections, which objections shall be entered at large upon the journal and the board shall proceed to reconsider the matter. Appropriations may be approved in whole or in part by the county executive and the part approved shall become law, and the part objected to shall be returned in the same manner as provided for in other resolutions or ordinances. If, after such reconsideration, two-thirds of the members-elect of the board agree to adopt the resolution or enact the ordinance or the part of the resolution or ordinance objected to, it shall become effective on the date prescribed but not earlier than the date of passage following reconsideration.”

The key difference between the county board and the county executive is the county executive is focused on the county's operations (i.e. administrating) whereas the county board is focused on setting policy (i.e. legislating). Beyond that, Wis. Stat. s. 59.17(2)(br) notes that in counties with a population less than 750,000 the county executive shall, “*appoint and supervise the heads of all county departments except those elected by the people and except where the statutes provide that the appointment shall be made by other elected officers.*”

The county executive and his or her staff are not responsible for setting policy, though we can help inform the policymaking process. So, when it comes to a person's favorite issue to follow, it would make sense to attend committee meetings and to carry your ideas, thoughts, questions, comments, and concerns to your county board supervisor(s) through the committee process. The county executive and county staff are definitely here to help and to provide guidance, but as far as the actual policy decisions being made—where the rubber meets the road—most of that power lies with the county board and its committee structure. It goes without saying that government can be confusing at times, but once you take the time to learn how to navigate it, you can be pretty effective. Don't forget that a lot of this can start at your local—city, town, village—level, too. In fact, in many cases your local municipality has more authority to act on an issue than the county. Something to keep in mind.

Of course, the county executive has veto power. Now, one could try to get clever and use that to shape policy, but that can easily backfire and the board can still override the veto with a 2/3 majority. Some who pushed for the county executive position when it was first put into place by Portage County voters wanted to create a check and balance for a county board that they felt had run amok. Now, I'll be the first to tell you that there's always room for improvement regardless of where one is in life, but if a county board was truly of one mindset, a 2/3 majority wouldn't be hard to come by and that essentially neutralizes the county executive's veto power when it comes to checking and/or balancing policy.

Power is tricky. A more savvy approach would look toward engaging the committee process and the county board as individuals and as a whole in order to promote informed and constructive conversations in the decision-making process. Then, you can help to shape policy via collaboration and not find yourself contemplating more awkward and antagonistic applications of raw power like the veto. Working together is, unfortunately, a foreign concept in modern politics. It is a much more effective approach to the notion of checks and balances, though. If the veto is being used, it's probably a sign that something went wrong in the deliberative process. It can be a helpful, non-abrasive tool in certain cases, but more often than not it is powers like the veto that lead to something I saw a lot of in the military—power tripping.

The military is actually an interesting comparison to use here. What I've found is that a lot of people think that county government has an organizational chart similar to a military unit. Specifically, they think that the county executive is calling all of the shots and is able to direct the county almost unilaterally. In that sense, it's as if people view the executive as a four-star general type of position. In reality, though, county government is calibrated to the near-opposite of the military with our form of democracy.

If there were any generals in county government, they'd be one-star generals and we'd elect them every two years. That's your county board supervisors. The county board chair is a two-star general in that he or she would outrank the other supervisors and be in charge of running their unit. That's where the Executive Operations committee comes into play. It is a committee that, among other things, provides leadership and direction to the other oversight committees. It's a five person committee that is elected from among the board's membership at the beginning of each two-year term by the county board itself, and it is led by the county board chair (Al Haga, District 15).

The county executive can turn into a three-star general with the veto, but that is episodic power, which is brief and fleeting. There is some three-star power in the incredible amount of budget work that the executive and his or her staff are required to do, but at the end of the day statutes only require that the executive presents a budget to the county board. Then, the county board amends the budget (or not) and adopts it. In other words, it's not my budget, nor is it the county board's budget. It's our budget.

There are undoubtedly aspects of this position and its power(s) that are left open to interpretation, and in positions like this some may cling too tightly to their stars. What I've found is that the county executive is a two-star title whose day-to-day work mirrors what you'd expect from a CEO or Chief of Staff. Granted, the executive deals with everything from the big, broad issues of the day all the way down to the minute details of county governing. So, it varies. A lot. Then, there's the ultimate power found in our four-star general who is often referred to as "the people" or "the voting public."

If county government was structured more like the military—like a lot of people seem to wish it was—then the real generals would be your senior staff and your department heads. They are the subject-matter experts in what they do, and they've put in decades of service to the county. They are the people who, for all intents and purposes, really run the show. If you ask me, our system doesn't acknowledge this as often as it should. That said, the only way our system of local government really works is if everyone plays their part to the best of their abilities.