

Challenges and Opportunities for Burleigh County



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I. Introduction



Burleigh County was organized in 1873 and in 1889 when North Dakota became a state and Bismarck was named the capital, Burleigh County became the hub of growth and development for western North Dakota. The population has grown to over 95,000 people. In addition to the City of Bismarck growth, the County has experienced an explosion of rural subdivisions in the past few decades, which have created a host of challenges

for rural residents and local officials.

The County is currently governed by a County Board of Commissioners. This five-member board is tasked with major responsibilities to guide (and direct) the County's operations. This is accomplished by assigning each Commissioner a Portfolio of Departments in which to oversee and guide. Each Commissioner brings their own strengths to this endeavor; however, this has created inconsistencies in how departments are managed and how (and what) items are discussed and decided by the Board as a whole.

Due to ever changing times, our county government needs to periodically review our internal management structure and decide if it still meets the needs of our community. From time to time the structure of government needs to change in order to better serve the public's needs. This change does not always mean that the existing structure is poor or inadequate; it is more a function of a future prediction of where we as a society are headed. Changes can be small, or occasionally major changes in the structure need to be considered.



This plan is intended to lay out some of the more complicated issues that have been discussed over the years and to give the Commissioners and public some possible solutions. It is not intended to create a list of items that need to be addressed all at once, but a list of items that we (County Board of Commissioners, Department Heads and citizens) can work on in the coming years to improve the function of County Government.

II. County Organization

A. County Administrator

One way in which Burleigh County could improve their operations is to reorganize the county structure under a County Administrator form of government. Many counties in the United States (43%) have appointed administrators to help with the increasing complexity of county activities. Most often, county administrators implement the board's policy, run the daily operations of the county and prepare the annual budget.



Administrators are responsible for the day-to-day operations of their counties. It is their responsibility to bring coordination to the implementation of county services.



They work to build a county team of department heads and other employees. They establish and enforce policies in the areas of personnel, purchasing, cash management, risk management, planning, and employee development in order to provide more efficient and effective government. They monitor the State and Federal Legislative process serving as a liaison between the County Board and our representatives in the State Capitol and Federal Government. The Administrator will testify on bills and represent the County's position on current issues. Having an administrator provides more direct accountability to the Commission for the proper operation of county services.

The Commission benefits in several ways from an administrator:

- They now can spend more of their valuable time focusing on policy issues, community goals, and major projects rather than on administrative details.
- They get better and more comprehensive information and analysis from the administrator in a staff role to enable them to make more informed decisions.
- The administrator can provide continuity when new persons are elected as officials.

However, as with all major changes to the existing County structure, there will be some disadvantages to adding a County Administrator:

- In addition to the County Administrator position, we will need to add various administrative and support staff. This increase in personnel, as well as additional equipment and office space, will cost the County a significant amount of money.
- The public may perceive this addition as a move by the Commissioners to reduce their involvement with running the County government.
- Department heads and other county employees may view this addition as creating a separation between the decision makers (Commissioners) and the line employees.



If the County Board wishes to move forward with developing this form of government, it is recommended that they appoint a Commissioner to work with a small group of Department Heads in developing an Organizational Chart and Budget to be presented to the County Board for their approval and authorization to move forward.

B. IT Department

Burleigh County has struggled with adequate Information Technology (IT) support for over ten years. IT service is contracted with the City of Bismarck. Inefficient



service has led to outside contracts for the Human Service Zone (Social Services) and the Highway Department. The Sheriff’s Department has a staff employee providing direct IT service for their three facilities. The combination of IT support services for Burleigh County is disparate and inefficient. Burleigh County did increase their 2021 allocation for City of Bismarck IT services to include minimal equipment (servers) owned by Burleigh County.

In North Dakota, all the large counties (Cass, Grand Forks, Ward) have their own IT Department. It should also be noted that many mid-sized counties also have their own IT Department.

It is time for Burleigh County to start merging toward their own IT Department via one of the following methods:

- Full-time employees (4-5)
- Contract with outside service (NRG, Armor Interactive, etc.) and full-time employees (2).

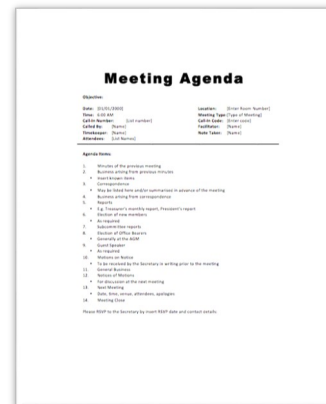


Burleigh County has several departments that should have access to 24-hour emergency services: Emergency Management, Highway Department, Sheriff's Department. The Auditor's Office should also have ready access during tax season and elections. We have experienced several emergency/disaster situations and elections where service was not timely. In order to move forward, the County Board should direct a small committee of Department Heads to develop an implementation plan and budget to be presented to the County Board for their approval and authorization to proceed.

C. County Board Agenda Items

The County Board Agenda and Packet has always been a bit inconsistent on how it is put together and what type of information is included in the public packet. It is recommended that the County Board work with the Department Heads to establish requirements and a process for items to be placed on the agenda.

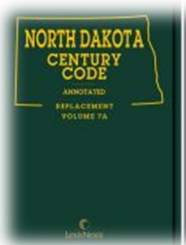
If the County Board wishes to move forward with establishing a consistent process and a standardized packet, it is recommended that they appoint a Commissioner to work with a small group of Department Heads in developing a plan to move forward.



III. County Operations

A. Budgeting

The County Budgeting process is regulated by standard accounting principles and North Dakota Century Code, in addition to guidelines from various branches of the North Dakota State government. Beyond these requirements the County should have a formal policy and procedure for developing the Annual Budget that is transparent, goal based, and consistent between Departments. The general outline of a process is as follows:



1. Annually the County Board sets general goals and desires for the coming year's budget (this includes FTE increases, space changes, and other goals and guidelines that the County Board feels appropriate).
2. The Department Heads take these goals, along with other information, and develop recommendations for salary raises, health insurances changes and other recommendations.
3. The County Board reviews recommendations and sets final budget guidelines for salary changes, FTE's and other items.
4. The County Board appoints a Budget Review Team (Board Chair, Board Vice Chair, County Auditor, and County Finance Director) to meet with each Department and Department's portfolio holder.
5. Each Department develops their Budget using the County Board's guidelines.
6. The Budget Review Team and each Department meets to review proposed budget and to establish an approved Department Preliminary Budget.
7. The Budget Review Team then establishes a County Preliminary Budget by combining all of the Departments' Budgets into one packet. The County Preliminary Budget should also include overall Budget Summary for easy review by the Public.
8. The County Finance Director presents the Preliminary Budget to the County Board for review and initial changes. Department Heads, at this point, are allowed to appeal any Budget Review Team decisions that they feel should be corrected by the County Board.
9. County Board Approves Preliminary Budget and sets Final Budget Hearing.



10. County Board conducts Public Hearing on Final Budget and makes final changes to the Annual Budget.

By establishing a defined process and procedures for the development of the annual budget, the Board creates a transparent process that is consistent across Departments and is clearly understood by the Public.

B. Employees (Attraction, Retention, Promotion)



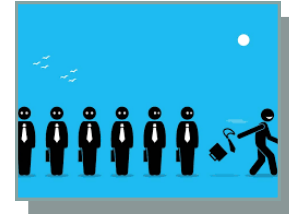
Burleigh County is the second most populated county in the state of North Dakota. The County employs 347 employees. On average, over the last five years, the turnover rate has been 14.08%. In order to provide the services, the County must attract and retain talented and motivated employees. In order to do this, the County must be competitive in a market where there are several other government entities competing for the same workforce.

1. Employee Attraction – In order to attract talented employees, the County must have an Applicant Tracking System that allows applicants to apply for our County positions using their preferred technology, such as a mobile device. Our current application process only allows for the use of a Windows Personal Computer and does not allow application processing on either a mobile device or any Apple devices such as iPhone. We are losing applicants because of this process as they are not able to apply for any of our positions if they do not have access to a personal computer. Applicants are not able to upload their transcripts or resumes into the application software and have to email them or mail them separate from this process. An Applicant Tracking system can automate this process and the communication that is needed between the applicants, hiring managers and the human resources department.



2. Employee Engagement – In order to measure employee engagement there must be a formal employee engagement program implemented that is used consistently and provides measurement in the appropriate areas of employee engagement. The different components of a formal Employee Engagement Program are listed below:

- a. Implementation of a formal employee Onboarding Program with reviews at 30, 60, and 90-day increments.
- b. Implement an annual Employee Engagement Survey that asks the same questions each year and the analysis is measured in year-over-year responses.
- c. Continue employee exit interviews to gather data on turnover.
- d. Implement stay interviews to gather data on retention.
- e. Implement Quarterly Pulse Surveys to gather feedback on policy issues and benefit programs.



3. Compensation System – With the tight labor market that we have in Burleigh County, we must compensate our employees fairly. The current Pay Grade and Pay Step Program was implemented in 2009.



Over the years the percentages both between the grades and between the Pay Steps have become eroded and this has caused pay compression. We need to work on restoring the Pay Grade and Pay Step Program so that it is competitive in the marketplace. This will help us both attract and retain talented employees for the County.

4. Employee Growth and Development – In order to retain employees, there must be growth and development opportunities for them. The County needs to provide training for frontline supervisors across the county departments. This will ensure that policy is being implemented correctly. To a degree, Succession planning and career ladders can be implemented to ensure employees are ready for advancement prior to the opportunity becoming available.

C. Facility/Space Needs (Renovate, Expand, Buildings)

In order to maintain needed facilities for the processing of County Government, the County needs to develop a comprehensive Facility/Space Needs study. Historically, the County addresses space needs on an ad hoc basis dealing with problems as they arrive. In order to better plan for the long-term needs of the County, a global plan needs to be developed considering County growth, future employee levels, condition of existing facilities as well as other factors that affect our space needs.



The process will require the County Board members as well as Department Heads to work together in peering into the future of Burleigh County. The general outline of a process to be followed in developing a comprehensive Facility/Space Needs Plan is as follows:



1. County Board sets guidelines (anticipated County growth levels, etc.) in which the Department Heads can use in predicting space needs.
2. Department Heads use guidelines to product staffing levels for the next 5, 10, 15, and 20 years. Staffing levels and other space requirements will dictate future needs.
3. The proposed needs will be collected (by one of the Board Members or by one of the Department Heads) from each Department and compared to the existing facilities in order to determine what changes and additions to the existing structures will be needed in the next 5, 10, 15, and 20 years.
4. A proposed build-out plan (with budget) will be developed and approved by the County Board. This plan will be used to prioritize future projects and help the County Budget for required expansion.

D. Maintenance of Existing Facilities

Currently, the County addresses maintenance of existing facilities differently for each building. Some buildings have County staff that maintain and clean the building and other buildings use contracted staff for this purpose. In order to better plan for the long term needs of the County, a plan needs to be developed on how best to maintain and clean our existing facilities.



The plan will require the County Board members as well as Department Heads working together in developing a comprehensive Facility Maintenance Plan.

The Plan could be developed as follows:



1. The County Board should appoint someone (recommend an existing staff member) to act as a lead team member for this project.
2. The Project Lead meets with County Commissioners, and Department Heads to collect existing facilities’ maintenance information and to develop an agreement on how the County should move forward.
3. The Project Lead presents a plan to the County Board for their approval.
4. The details of the plan are then implemented.

IV. Infrastructure

A. Roadways and Bridges

The major problem with funding of the County Highway System is that we have assumed that either gas tax revenues would keep up with inflation or that the State would follow through with additional funding to help County Highway Departments (such as the Prairie Dog Funding). Unfortunately, this has not taken place and the Highway Department has fallen behind in meeting the needs of the community. Currently, virtually all of our resources are being spent on the maintenance of our existing roadway system, including subsidizing townships for the maintenance of their roadways. The few remaining dollars are being used to pay back a Bank of North Dakota loan and matching federally funded projects. This leaves no money left to construct any locally funded projects.



In order to continue much needed area construction projects and to stabilize the Department's revenues against fluctuation in other funding sources, we need to establish a higher levy support level for the Highway Department. Since 2016 we have increased the mill levy from 0.25 mills to 2.5 mills in 2021. However, since we have not been able to keep up with current demand, we feel that it is time to take bold steps and provide the needed funds for the Highway Department and increase the Road and Bridge mill levy.

As we have suggested over the past few years, we believe it is time that Burleigh County raise additional funds for the Highway Department through a mill levy increase. We believe that it is time to be bold and increase the Road and Bridge mill levy to 10 mills. The additional money would be set aside equally to the following areas: to match federally funded projects, to upgrade the existing system, and to expand the existing system through the Gravel Road Construction Program. We realize that this will place a stress on some residents and the Community; however, we believe that the increase in the capacity and safety to our existing roadway system will outweigh the cost.



B. Growth Plan

Growth in Burleigh County has always been a struggle between two different factors. First, the desire of local officials to keep property taxes down by not allowing unbridled expansion to take place, and forcing the County to provide services across a large area; and second, the strong desire to allow property owners to develop their land as they see fit. Over the years both the Planning Commission and the County Board have tried different ways of balancing these competing ideals. Unfortunately, the inconstant treatment of this issue has left us with numerous sets of competing guiding precedents, which has led to confusion for staff, developers and the public.



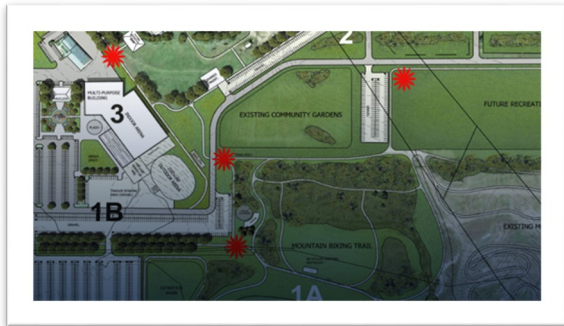
At this point, the County Board working through the County Planning Department and the Planning Commission, need to reset the guiding principal on development within Burleigh County. The process should start with the Planning Department meeting with the County Board and setting some high-level goals, which will then be refined at the Planning Commission.

The ultimate goal of this effort should be to clearly define Burleigh County’s growth plan for the next 20 years.

C. Missouri Valley Complex

The Missouri Valley Complex has long been an untapped resource for Burleigh County. Over the years the grounds have been host to many different functions and events. However, the implementation of Master Plans for this area has been met with minimal success. It is time to review the latest Master Plan and start the implementation. The general outline of a process, in order to improve the function of the Missouri Valley Complex is as follows:





1. The County Board sets general goals and desires for the Missouri Valley Complex and appoint someone (recommend an existing staff member) to act as a lead team member for this project.
2. The Project Lead meets with County Commissioners, Department Heads and interested citizens in developing a plan to move this project forward.

3. The Project Lead presents a plan (that includes details on implementation of the Master Plan under fiscally constrained budget) to the County Board for their approval.
4. The details of the plan are then implemented.

D. Parks and Public Access to the Missouri River

As with the Missouri Valley Complex, the Missouri River is an untapped resource and is one of our greatest assets in this area. Burleigh County needs to consider developing additional Public Access to the River and also creating parks, both large and small. The County Board needs to decide if this is a priority, and if so start a process similar to the Missouri Valley Complex process to develop an implementation plan.



V. Public Interaction

Our website and social media accounts represent Burleigh County’s online brand. The County needs to foster and enhance our on-line presence by implementing the following items:



A. Website

A powerful digital presence that should convey Burleigh County and services:

- Online Identity
- Obtain Services: Areas that can be accomplished quickly (hours of service, pay bills, apply for permits, fillable forms).
- Notification Services (digital subscribers): Subscriptions to agendas, minutes, event news.
- Search Engine: User-friendly and intuitive without knowing government structure.
- Mobile Access: Accessible from any device by automatically scaling and reformatting web pages to accommodate various screen sizes.
- Human Resources Interface: User-friendly job application process for the person applying and employees tracking applications.
- Emergency Situations: Promote calm and control by providing information regarding the situation, what Burleigh County is doing, as well as what the community should be doing.
- Employee Portal: Employee access to online information (forms, policy, benefit information, etc.)



Our current website was last updated in 2010, and minimally provides some of the services listed above.

