



An AWESOME Responsibility

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Photos by Julie Black

Water Board Members Perform Valuable Community Service

Imagine that your community has just experienced a water-borne illness that has killed 10 people and sickened hundreds of others, and you sit on the local water governing board. Lawsuits are being filed. Fines are being imposed. People in the community want answers—not an enviable position.

Providing safe drinking water to a community is an awesome responsibility. Today water governing board members must make policies, handle financial decisions, and deal with personnel issues all while providing outstanding customer service. And they must do all of these things as volunteers, usually on a part-time basis.

Water is one of the most important resources a community has. With rising operation costs, increasing regulations and an ever-expanding demand for new technologies, today's

water system governing boards have more responsibility than ever before.

"We have been quick to assume rights to use water but slow to recognize obligations to preserve and protect it In short, we need a water ethic—a guide to right conduct in the face of complex decisions about natural systems we do not and cannot fully understand."

*Sandra Postel,
Last Oasis: Facing Water Scarcity*

"As a water system board member, your number one goal is compliance," says Jeff Cooley, Alabama state coordinator of the Community Resource Group, Inc. (CRG), one of six regional organizations of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership. "Everything you do branches off of compliance.

So whether you're setting rates, collecting samples, or developing long-range plans, it all centers around compliance."

The Basics

"For every water system, there has to be someone who oversees that water system," Cooley says. "It doesn't operate by itself. Each water system out there has to have an operator and a managing or governing entity overseeing it.

"It's either a municipal system where you have a council that is the actual board or it's a county/rural system that is overseen by a board appointed by either the county commission or county council. There are also customer-owned water systems where the board members are actually voted into their position each year at an annual meeting."

With approximately 54,000 community water systems in the U.S., it stands to reason that there has to be management oversight for each of them. Of all the community water systems, 45,000 of those serve less than 3,300 people, and 30,000 of those serve less than 500 people. For larger systems with engineers, consultants, and accountants on staff, the role of a board member might not be all that challenging. However, for small systems lacking these supplemental resources, the job is often more demanding and confusing.



For more information about water boards, see the article "Water Boards: How to train them? What to expect from them? How to lead them? What to pay them?" on the NESCS Web site at www.nesc.wvu.edu/ndwc.

Many new board members lack knowledge of how much it costs to provide safe drinking water or what the issues are. Fortunately for newcomers, help is available to ease them into the sometimes difficult, often challenging role of public service on a water governing board.

The National Environmental Training Center for Small Communities (NETCSC), a program of the National Environmental Services Center, has a short course for local officials of small water systems that outlines water governing board members' responsibilities for providing safe drinking water. Sandra Fallon, NETCSC training specialist, says, "Across the nation people *recognize* that board members need training. It's a bigger challenge to *provide* that training."

NETCSC's training course was devised to train representatives from state organizations to educate board members at the local level. The course has been successfully implemented hundreds of times across the country. NETCSC has also presented the course directly to board members.

An Important Role

Cooley believes the role of a water governing board member "is probably one of the most important jobs in a small, rural community. The water system is vital to them. For that system to be viable, they need a good managing board. They don't really get job descriptions, and sometimes it's a thankless position. With new regulations and requirements coming out yearly, it is important that the boards stay informed."

Alabama, according to Cooley, is starting to approach the idea of mandatory board training. Currently, board member training is voluntary in most states. Although a definitive list is unavailable, preliminary research reveals that only Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and West Virginia mandate some level of board training.

"We do provide onsite board management training in small group settings. We provide comprehensive information and hands-on training

Water Bible Outlines Responsibilities

The Water Board Bible, written by Ellen Miller and Elmer Ronnebaum and published by the Kansas Rural Water Association, details some of the basic local governing board responsibilities.

Legal Responsibilities:

- carry out "rules and regulations" or system policies;
- comply with applicable federal, state, and local laws and ordinances;
- conduct business and make contracts as a board; and
- ensure that all documents (records, minutes, notices, etc.) are created, maintained, and made available according to state and federal law.

Financial Responsibilities:

- use diligence and care when exercising rights and powers for, and on behalf of, others;
- use appropriate accounting, purchasing, and recordkeeping standards in all transactions; and
- ensure that system revenue covers system operations, debt service, and reserves.

In addition to basic legal and financial responsibilities, a governing board member may have the following responsibilities:

- make policy decisions and carry out the water system's mission;
- approve and oversee budgets;
- conduct meetings in accordance with applicable laws;
- determine and set water rates;
- plan strategically for the future, including planning for the utility's long-term sustainability;
- plan for land use and community growth;
- serve as an interface between landowners, business interests, public officials, and those involved in managing the system;
- work with the plant operator, manager, and supervisor;
- oversee system operation, maintenance, regulation, and compliance issues;
- plan for capital improvements;
- secure financing;
- oversee system upgrades, expansion, or new construction;
- oversee office staff and services;
- hire and manage personnel;
- interact with water system customers and provide good customer service; and
- secure public involvement and educate the public.

Source: *The Water Board Bible*.



about financial issues, emergency response, risk management, customer service, personnel management, and EPA regulations," he says.

"I would put financial management at the top of the list," Cooley continues. "Many times the board members come from various backgrounds and have various ideas about financial management. Part of what we do is try to make them realize that a water system works differently than a local grocery store or another local business. You have certain liabilities and responsibilities that go along with it. One of the main things they need to understand is that they could be held liable as a board if something goes wrong in that system."

Although many boards are covered with liability insurance, Cooley says if the system is not managed properly, the insurance may not cover them, especially when it deals with regulations. Cooley begins his training sessions with a "shock and awe" session of worst-case scenarios, much like the one described in this article's introduction.

"I give them actual real-time news stories," he says. "I'm not just saying these things could happen. I actually show them incidents that have happened and give them copies of news articles of how those things have happened in small communities just like theirs.

"When I get their attention, that's when I tell them, 'this is everything that can go wrong. Now let me inform you of how to make sure those things don't happen in your system.' If I approached it with a type of training where I gloss over a lot of important issues, I don't think I would be doing my part," says Cooley.

Part of the training is reassuring board members that the more they understand the challenges of the job, the better equipped they will be to meet those challenges. A well-informed and active board can be better equipped to make the tough decisions needed to maintain viability in their system.

Being Active is Key

Wyoming runs a governing board training program as well. Brian Mark, supervisor of the state revolving loan fund program within in the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), says, "A well-trained, active board can make the difference between having a utility run smoothly or facing enforcement action from the regulatory agencies."

Mark says his state has a very active voluntary program. The DEQ works in concert with the Wyoming Association of Municipalities and the Wyoming Association of Rural Water Systems to reach the boards.

"I think just being active is the main responsibility of a board member," says Mark. "The willingness to participate and the willingness to be part of the system is what counts. That may sound simple on the front, but it's very difficult for a lot of these systems to find people willing to step up to the plate with that sort of dedication of service. It is a big commitment."

Mark recommends that new board members understand proper meeting conduct using Roberts Rules of Order. Being well prepared for meetings is also a must. "They should make sure before the meeting that they have a copy of the agenda, so they can be prepared for the issues at hand whether it's to purchase equipment, make a personnel decision, or go over an enforcement issue," says Mark. "They need to do a little research before the meeting. I guess a lot of these things are just day-to-day managers' responsibilities."

One of the biggest problems Mark sees with new boards is that they leave everything to the plant operator. Board members need to take an active

role in the utility. "A water board should act in much the same way as a board of directors, setting the future direction for the utility," he says. "That is not to say they should be out there turning valves, but they need to be the managers of that system."

The Tough Get Going

Filling a position on a voluntary water governing board can sometimes be a difficult task. Most volunteers have day jobs that consume most of their time and running a water board might fall to the bottom of their list of priorities. It's easy to see why with all of the issues outlined above.

Despite the possible pitfalls of joining a water governing board and the tremendous responsibilities associated with the job, Mark encourages volunteers. "We all have responsibilities—families and jobs," he says. "But to the extent possible, I would encourage anyone to become involved in their utilities, both water and sewer, especially in smaller communities, because without that participation, without the voluntary dedication of board members, these systems aren't going to work properly."

Cooley agrees adding, "One of my favorite quotes that I use in my board training is by Ben Franklin. It says, 'When the well runs dry, we all know the worth of water.'"

With the help of these regional and state-run training organizations and NETCSC, small communities across the country are already finding out the worth of water and how to properly govern their utilities to protect it.

For more information about NETCSC's board training course, call Sandra Fallon at (800) 624-8301 ext. 5582 or e-mail sfallon@mail.wvu.edu. Learn more about the Community Resource Group by visiting their Web site at www.crg.org. To order a copy of The Water Board Bible, call the Kansas Rural Water Association at (785) 336-3760 or order the book from their Web site at www.krwa.net/store.



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