

## Clark County Board of Freeholders, 2013-14

# Briefing: County Executive

### Overview

- County executive is an elected official that represents the executive branch of county government. In representing the executive branch, the county executive is distinguished from the legislative branch of government (in this case often referred to as a county council).
- Under Washington’s commission form of government (i.e., under general law), the executive branch of county government is shared jointly by the three Commissioners and six other executive elected officials including Assessor, Auditor, Clerk, Prosecuting Attorney, and Treasurer. A county executive would be in charge of those departments not otherwise led by such additional elected executive officers, such as Public Works, Public Health, Community Development, Public Information and Outreach, General Services, etc.
- A county executive would have appointment authority and oversight over non-elected department heads. In some charters these appointments are subject to review by Council.
- A county executive may, or may not, replace a county administrator. Typically, a county executive appoints a deputy to help administer the day-to-day operations of the county.
- The county executive initiates the budget process by proposing it to the county council.
- A county executive is most often the primary spokesperson for the county government.

### **Summary**

A county executive is roughly equivalent at the county level to a “strong” mayor at the city level. Usually seen in the larger population home rule counties, a county executive is a countywide elected official who is responsible for many, but not all of the executive and administrative functions of the county. This position appoints and removes the key administrative officials (those who, under the charter, report directly to and assist the county executive), usually has veto authority over county council actions, and is a full-time salaried position. County executives are typically elected countywide to four-year terms.

### Perspectives

- A key argument in favor of the county executive/council form of governance is that it gives the public a single elected official to look to and hold accountable when determining whether the county is operating effectively and efficiently (or not).
- When decisions require the agreement of both a county executive and county council, the public processes engaged by both branches generally provide more opportunities for participation and scrutiny. Thus, a public process to arrive at those decisions is generally more open and transparent than when a single body comprises both the executive and legislative branches, and has the ability to both approve and implement decisions.
- Critics of a county executive/county council structure argue that policy leadership may become politically divided, resulting in friction between the two branches of county government. Every elected official feels empowered to do the “right” thing. When each side feels it is directly elected and responsible to county constituents, each may be compelled to feel responsible for overall county policy. Negative outcomes could include policy disputes between the county executive

and council and, in extreme cases, sabotaging of programs or policies one side may want and the other not. Consequently, a county executive/council form of governance can become more polarized and politicized than the commission form (where the executive and legislative functions are consolidated in one decision-making body).

- As a further balance against county executive powers, in many charter counties the county council has subpoena powers to receive testimony and documents directly from staff that report to the county executive.
- As a further balance against county executive powers, in some charter counties department head appointments by the county executive are subject to acceptance or rejection by the county council.
- As part of the balance of powers between branches of government, the county executive will usually have veto authority over legislation approved by the county council. The council then has the ability to override that veto, usually by a 2/3 affirmative vote.
- With a single county executive to whom department heads report, a result could be improved implementation clarity and reduced ambiguity, as opposed to divergent policy viewpoints which may arise from multiple bosses having equal authority/influence.
- The effectiveness of any position will largely depend on the individual skills and personality brought to that office. As the top countywide elected official, the county executive has a greater capacity to influence fellow elected officials, interest groups, and other public interests to energize, mobilize, and galvanize internal and external support for policy initiatives. It is important to note, however, that this influence is not absolute, will be more or less effective depending upon the personality of the elected individual, and will occur under the extensive scrutiny of voters and the media.
- From a “political caché” perspective, a county executive can increase Clark County’s stature vis-à-vis regional, state, and federal governments. A county executive would be seen by many as the top politician in Clark County. The advantage in having that kind of political caché is the ability to coalesce the political stature of the entire county within a single person and utilize the whole of that weight to influence decision-making at regional, state, and federal levels (an activity that is currently dissipated between personalities and agencies). An elected county executive would thus become a singular voice for the entire county and consequently could be more effective at representing residents’ interests before regional, state, and federal governments.
- A county executive position may or may not cost more than a commission form of governance, but it depends on several adjustable factors such as the compensation of county council members, how many are on the council, and if new staff is required by the county executive.