

Wisconsin Counties Association

2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE ***GAME DAY***

9:15 – 10:15 AM

**Strategic Planning for Counties: Principles,
Pitfalls, and Practical Applications**



Strategic Planning for Counties: Principles, Pitfalls, and Practical Applications

—
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Outline

- What is strategic planning and why do it?
- What is different about strategic planning in the world of county governments?
- What is “good strategy” and what is “bad strategy?”
- What should we consider as we begin strategic planning?



What is Strategic Planning and Why Do It?



Strategy

- "the art of a general, the science of **war**," from French *stratégie* (16 c.) and directly from Latinized form of Greek *stratēgia* "office or command of a general,"



Battle of Waterloo, William Sadler (Public Domain)



Strategic Planning is a Process and a Policy

- **Process:**

- Analysis of Internal and External Environment
- Identification of Challenges and Opportunities
- Creation of Goals and Objectives
- Development of Strategy to Accomplish Goals and Objectives

- **Policy:**

- Framework for decision making
- Informs other policies:
 - Budget
 - Capital Improvement Plan
 - Zoning, Land-Use, Human Resources
- Focuses “agenda setting” and “decision making” of county board, committees, and departments



Why Strategic Plan?

- **Output:**

- Document that can provide focus and direction

- **Outcome:**

- Proactive County Government (rather than reactive)
- Increase trust among county board members, department heads, staff, residents, and other important constituent groups
- Increase organizational performance



What's special about county governments strategically planning?

- Decisions You Can Make
 - Level of service for mandated services
 - Offer unmandated services
 - Leading on regional issues
 - Raising other revenue sources
 - County government policy changes
- Board Elections
- Decisions You Can't Make
 - Mandated services
 - Unallowable services (e.g., schools)
 - Raising tax revenue
 - Municipal, State, and Federal Policy Changes



On a clean sheet of paper write down:

- One reason a county SHOULD pursue strategic planning.
- One reason a county SHOULDN'T pursue strategic planning.



Bad Strategy



Weekend Errand Strategy

Disorganized to-do list without a clear focus on critical challenges or how to prioritize limited resources



Chasing Rainbows Strategy

Grand ambitions with no realistic path to achievement



Good Strategy



Diagnoses the Problem (Goal or Priority)



Create a General Policy for How We Want to Overcome the Problem (Strategy)



Generate Set of Coherent Actions to Address It (Action Plan)



Activity: Identify Good Strategy and Bad Strategy



Olmsted County, MN (County Seat: Rochester) 2024-2028 Strategic Plan



- **Community trust and engagement**
 - Olmsted County earns community trust through engagement, collaboration, and reliable public service.
- **Community safety and well-being**
 - Olmsted County strives to keep our community safe and ensures equitable access to programs and services that improve quality of life.
- **Environmental sustainability**
 - Olmsted County leads in sustainable practices.
- **Responsible growth and development**
 - Olmsted County anticipates and adapts to the needs of a growing community.
- **Effective and engaged workforce**
 - Olmsted County has an engaged and high-performing workforce that reflects the diversity of our community.



Ramsey County, MN (County Seat: Saint Paul) 2024-2025 Strategic Plan

- **Priority:** Advancing a Holistic Approach to Strengthen Individuals & Families
- **Goals:**
 - Families have access to family coaching services through trusted community organizations that help parents identify and achieve their goals for their families.
 - Implementation of the 2024/2025 Food Security Strategic Plan, focused on expanding urban agriculture, enhancing information and resource sharing with community and increasing food access points in the Ramsey County enterprise and food rescue opportunities.
 - Implementation of a one-stop, automated referral system that recommends county programs and benefits for which families may be eligible and connects them to resources.
- **Actionable strategies**
 - Coordinate and promote partnerships of food security related organizations and internally to build referral processes to address immediate food needs and identify policy improvements to advocate for change, this can include staff trainings, appropriate referrals and satellite food distribution sites, and aligning within legislative platforms.
 - Partner with community organizations, local government entities and internal Ramsey County departments to expand and enhance local food growing spaces to build resiliency and food security and identify food rescue opportunities.
 - Implement a basic needs screening process for staff and residents to use at entry points into the Ramsey County benefit system to connect Ramsey County benefits and services to those may need them.
 - In partnership with community, identify internal Ramsey County partners to expand and sustain family coach services. Conduct an outcomes and process evaluation of family coach services to understand impacts and ensure sustainable growth.
 - Provide training and resources to employment counselors to increase their awareness of early childhood care and education programming so they can holistically support parents of young children on their path to economic prosperity and meaningful careers.
 - Support the American Indian Economic Mobility Hub through evaluation and research in-kind services.



Cook County, MN (County Seat: Grand Marais)

Priority 3: Invest in a highly trained, high-performing and engaged workforce

- Increase Human Resources (HR) staffing from 1.5 FTE to 2.5 FTE to meet existing needs and enable the implementation of all items under Strategic Initiative 2:
- Establish training plans for all current staff and new hires and budget \$ to implement
- Review all job descriptions for accuracy on a three-year cycle.
- Conduct compensation study every three years to ensure competitive pay:
- Implement “stay” interviews to identify and address job satisfiers and dissatisfiers:
- Implement exit interview information sharing:



Stearns County, MN (County Seat: Saint Cloud) 2023 Strategic Priorities

Financial

- Prepare a budget and levy for 2023 that:
 - Is sustainable for the future
 - Keeps tax rate as low as possible
 - Offers a preliminary 2023 budget and levy acceptable to the County Board
- Utilizes fund balance and available CARES/ARP funds for one time and capital expenditures
- Review fee structure in coordination with budget process
- Responsibly manages County debt while planning for future projects
- React to any changes in State and Federal funding due to economic conditions

Infrastructure

- Continue wheelage tax and dedicated sales tax revenue for county highway system improvements
- Begin implementation of jail study recommendations
- Update Capital Improvement Plan

Technology

- Monitor and protect the County's cyber security systems
- Continue work on countywide broadband implementation plan
- Prioritize County systems for technology improvements, including:
 - Sheriff software systems
 - Attorney case management
 - HR/payroll system
 - Property tax/CAMA system
- Develop a digital government strategy and roadmap

Organizational

- Adequately fund mandated programs such as child protection, mental health, and programs for the elderly and disabled at levels that meet state and federal requirements
- Work with AMC and local legislators to reduce unfunded mandates and influence legislation impacting the County
- Expand efforts to work with community mental health issues: Cooperative mental health grant with Central MN Mental Health Clinic, Rapid Response Teams CAT initiatives in Human Services
- Utilize best practices developed over time to improve service delivery into the future



What is a county to do?





Prepare for Strategic Planning

- Decide if the time is right:
 - Old plan expired
 - New leadership (county board, administration)
 - Something external has put new pressure on the county
- Pre Plan:
 - Decide the resources you want to extend on strategic planning (time, money, resources)
 - Identify Leadership/Backbone: Administrator/Manager and Supervisors
 - Establish the type of plan your county needs:
 - “Kitchen Sink” (Mission, Vision, Values) or “90 Day Action Plan”
 - Have clarity



Case Study: Violet County's Crises

- Violet County is facing a series of pressing crises. The local nursing home closed, the highway department is over budget because of all the snow, and there's a measles outbreak. The previous strategic plan has expired though and per county code, it's time for a new plan.
- Should Violet County pursue a strategic plan? Why or why not?



Case Study: Badger County's Board Dysfunction

Badger County's county board is in disarray, plagued by severe internal conflict and a complete inability to collaborate. Supervisors bicker openly and obstruct decisions, paralyzing progress on essential capital improvement projects. This hostile environment has also significantly damaged employee morale, as staff fear budget cuts and lack clear direction.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, the County Administrator and County Board Chair believe a strategic plan is necessary to unify the board and restore effective governance.

- Should this board pursue a strategic plan? Why or why not?



Case Study: Muskie County

- Muskie County is wrapping up the conclusion of its service review pilot, in which departments are reviewed on their level of service (basic to platinum). Once this project wraps up and it is integrated into this year's budget, the administrator would like to begin a strategic planning process.
- Should this county pursue a strategic plan? Why or why not?



Case Study: Maple County's Wicked Problems

- Maple County has a new county coordinator who has inherited a two-year-old strategic plan with two years remaining in its lifespan. The county board is actively working on initiatives related to housing and workforce development, which are part of the current plan. The new coordinator believes a new strategic plan is necessary.
- Should Maple County pursue a strategic plan? Why or why not?

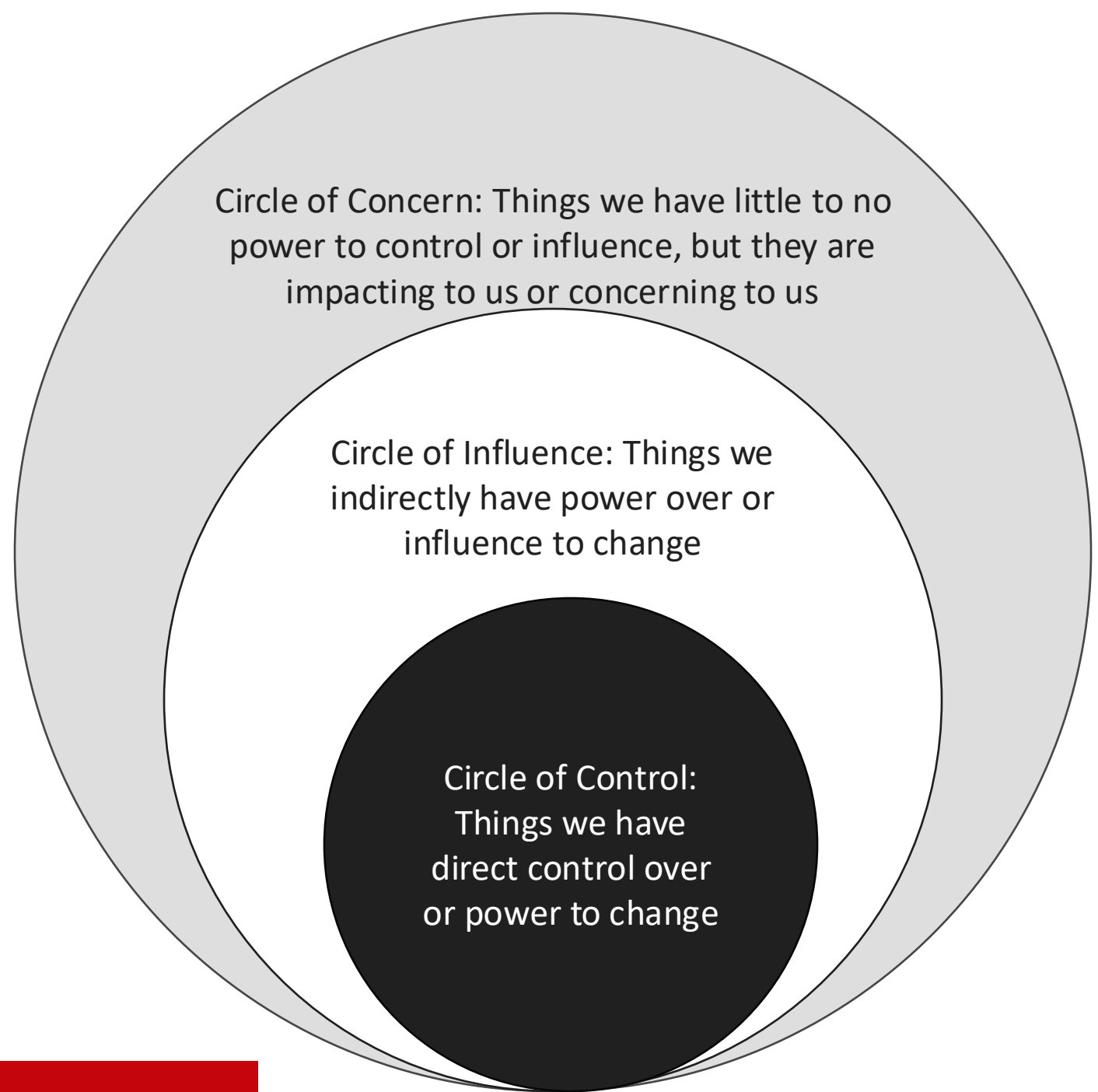


Case Study: Holstein County's Comprehensive Plan

- Holstein County is currently in the process of updating its comprehensive plan. The county has never had a strategic plan, and some members of the Planning and Development Committee believe that they can extract ideas from the comprehensive plan to create a five-year strategic plan.
- Should Holstein County pursue a strategic plan? Why or why not?



Understanding Our Ability to Make Change





Strategic Priority: Workforce Development

- A. Issue of Control
- B. Issue of Influence
- C. Issue of Concern



Strategic Priority: County Staff Morale

- A.** Issue of Control
- B.** Issue of Influence
- C.** Issue of Concern



Strategic Priority: Public Trust in Government

- A. Issue of Control
- B. Issue of Influence
- C. Issue of Concern



Strategic Priority: Housing Affordability

- A. Issue of Control
- B. Issue of Influence
- C. Issue of Concern



Strategic Priority: Infrastructure

- A. Issue of Control
- B. Issue of Influence
- C. Issue of Concern



Recap

- Strategic Planning is a process and policy
- Strategic Planning should be used when conditions are right: previous plan expired, change in leadership, major challenges to address
- Good Strategic Planning identifies a limited set of priorities to focus collective energy
- Good Strategy should focus on priorities that are within the counties sphere of control or sphere of influence.

