

HIMLE HORNER

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Association of Minnesota Counties

Current Assessment of Minnesota County Government Report of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Findings

Prepared by:

**Himle Horner Inc.,
8500 Normandale Lake Boulevard, # 720
Minneapolis, MN 55437**

**John Himle
Principal
Tel. 952/831-3200
Email: johnhimle@himlehorner.com
Web: www.himlehorner.com**

**Tim Penny
Senior Counselor
Tel. 952/831-3200
Email: tjpenny@mchsi.com
Web: www.himlehorner.com**

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Introduction

The Association of Minnesota Counties retained Himle Horner to assess critical issues for county government in Minnesota and help formulate recommendations for future direction. The first part of this process involved conducting qualitative and quantitative research. The second part of the process includes the analysis of the research findings to determine conclusions, recommendations and present strategic options for AMC to consider.

The Key objectives of the qualitative and quantitative research included:

1. Obtain candid, unfettered insight from audiences that are essential to the future success of county government/AMC.
2. Identify current strengths/weaknesses and future opportunities/challenges.
3. Develop recommendations/strategic options to assist AMC in effectively positioning county government for future years.

This document is a report of the findings, conclusions and recommendations from this research. Himle Horner analyzed this data to determine identifiable themes and concepts, strengths and weaknesses, perceptions regarding county government in Minnesota and opportunities/barriers to future reform.

Quantitative Research – Survey/Poll

Himle Horner contracted with respected Twin Cities survey firm Decision Resources, Ltd. to conduct a scientific random-sample statewide telephone survey of 800 Minnesotans. Himle Horner designed the questionnaire, managed the vendor and analyzed survey findings. Decision Resources conducted the survey fieldwork/interviewing and compiled data tables.

- The survey interviews (telephone) were conducted between September 4 and 16, 2003
- The margin of error for the survey findings is +/- 3.5%
- Questions were designed to measure attitudes regarding:
 - Key state issues / government in Minnesota
 - Perceptions, role and awareness of county government
 - Test messages and strategic options
- The sample of 800 was broken out into 8 clusters by Minnesota Congressional districts

Qualitative Research – Public Affairs Audit

Himle Horner conducted 35 confidential one-on-one interviews among a sample of senior legislators, policymakers in the Pawlenty administration, news media in the Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota, representatives of business and labor, public policy and opinion leaders, county commissioners, county administrators and county service providers. Himle Horner designed the questionnaire and conducted the interviews between September 12 and October 12, 2003. The Himle Horner interview team consisted of John Himle, principal; Tim Penny, senior counselor; Todd Rapp, senior director; Mark Schiffman, director; and Anna Youngerman, senior account executive.

Research participants included senior level representatives from Greater Minnesota and the Twin Cities metro area. The following is a breakdown of participants:

7	Senior legislators
3	Senior members of Governor Tim Pawlenty’s administration
7	Public policy groups including labor, business, local government, and social service providers
6	News media
12	County government including commissioners, administration, sheriff, CHS and social services <i>(careful consideration was given to reflect geographic, demographic and population size)</i>
35	Completed Interviews

Interviews, some conducted in person and most by telephone, followed a discussion guideline developed by Himle Horner and approved by AMC. Comments in the final research report are taken in aggregate and respondents were assured their responses and views would be kept confidential. On average, interviews lasted 45 minutes each.

A randomly developed universe of potential interview candidates was developed by Himle Horner and approved by AMC. Himle Horner selected the actual participants. Unlike quantitative research such as a survey or poll, qualitative research is not scientifically quantifiable. Instead, the diversity of key audiences represented in the research, their level of participation and quality of their answers define successful qualitative research.

The research findings must be considered in the context of its purpose – it was intended to examine issues and perceptions related to county government in Minnesota. It should be noted that audit findings tend to overstate the negative. Himle Horner recognizes this negative bias and accounts for it in the report.

Executive Summary

Counties are generally well-respected for their work

Respondents from both the poll/survey and the audit reported positive impressions of the work and services provided by county government. In particular, counties are perceived to provide services in a cost-effective manner.

Audit participants generally believe that county government has a strong connection to their constituents because they are closer to people than state or federal government. Minnesotans (poll respondents) share this opinion – they view county boards as approachable, with an understanding of the issues that face residents in their area.

Core county functions are not well understood by the public

Audit participants who are involved with county government and its services on a regular basis have an understanding of the role counties play as providers of services, most of which are mandated by the State of Minnesota. They are able to readily identify human services, transportation and public safety as the fundamental functions of county government.

However, the general public is less able to clearly identify the services and functions of county government. Nor do they understand the extent to which county's are mandated by the state to provide much of their functions and services. Telephone survey respondents identified human services and transportation as primarily state functions, and public safety is viewed as a city/township function.

Consequently, in the mind of the general public, counties do not have a clear agenda. While the public believes jobs, education and health care are the most critical issues, counties are not readily identified as policy-makers or problem-solvers on any of those issues. Meanwhile, counties spend a majority of their resources on secondary issues such as human services, transportation and public safety – while getting little credit for successful programs in those areas.

The political environment for tax increases is poor – the public is looking for reform in government

The public's opposition to tax increases has strengthened in the last year. According to the survey, only 25 percent of the public is willing to increase taxes to fund additional services, and fewer still would support property tax increases by county government in response to the current budget problems.

With the exception of social services, Minnesotans do not support drastic cuts in county services. The public supports existing spending for most county functions (and would even entertain increases in funding for security issues such as public safety and public health). Rather than spending cuts, a majority of Minnesotans expect restraint in spending increases and innovative new ways to deliver services.

Audit participants tended to believe this shift in Minnesota values towards an anti-tax climate may be long-term, and counties will need to re-prioritize services, redesign programs and find ways to share resources and functions with other units of government.

Support for change, but people doubt that counties will be change agents

Audit participants and the general public agree that reform of government is necessary, but they doubt that counties will be leading these efforts. In some cases, legitimate barriers exist to change – both agree that counties have too many mandates from the state.

However, there are also fears that counties are not well positioned for change. Audit participants believe counties lack broad planning and vision, and lack the incentive to think about issues in a regional manner. Instead, counties are seen as relying on other levels of government to develop an agenda for them.

Minnesotans (poll respondents) hold similar doubts about counties as change agents. While a strong majority believe counties need to find new ways to deliver services, less than half of those actually believe counties will take that approach in response to the current budget crisis. Ignoring this public sentiment is risky – Minnesota’s political environment is more supportive of change rather than the status quo.

Several audit respondents caution that the future may get worse – it may be 2005 before counties feel the full effects of Minnesota’s economic slump and the budget shortfalls. If counties don’t lead the reform movement, they may find that voters and other policymakers thrust reforms upon them.

Counties can lead a reform-based agenda

Citizens respect county government, and the public’s inability to clearly define the role of counties in their own lives creates the opportunity for county leaders to re-define themselves and their purpose. Critical elements of this agenda include:

- Prioritizing county functions
- Reducing state mandates and increasing incentives for innovation and creativity
- More cooperation and joint service delivery between counties and with other levels of government
- A strong public information campaign with residents within counties
- Changing service delivery before asking for new revenue from the taxpayers

Survey Findings

Political/Issue Environment

1. Direction that Minnesota is heading

- Families generally do not feel their finances are improving. Only 29% believe they are better off financially than they were one year ago, with 33% believing they are worse off – 37% said there has been no change.
- Minnesotans are evenly divided as to whether Minnesota is heading in the right direction. While 44% believe the state is going in the right direction, 41% think it is off on the wrong track. The responses to this question have been consistent in Minnesota for the past 18 months.
- Key issues of concern for Minnesotans are “family economics” issues – the economy, taxes and health care. Jobs/economy is among the top two issues for 57% of Minnesotans, followed by education (40%), taxes (39%) and health care (37%).

2. Minnesota’s tax burden

- A small percentage of Minnesotans support a tax increase at this time. When asked to generally evaluate Minnesota's tax climate, only 23% supported an increase in taxes to improve government services, compared with 47% who felt Minnesota taxes were already too high. Asked to look specifically at property taxes raised by counties, only 10% preferred having counties increase property taxes in reaction to their current budget situations, compared to 16% who want services reduced and 59% who want counties to find new ways to deliver services.
- No political party currently supports tax increases. DFLers were equally split between believing that the tax burden in Minnesota is too high (37%) and wanting tax increases for some services (35%), although Moe voters preferred tax increase by a 49%-29% margin. When asked about county taxes, DFLers preferred reform to new taxes by better than a 3:1 margin (55-15%). Independents and Republicans were far more likely to feel that taxes are already too high, and counties need to focus on reform rather than property tax increases.
- 26% of Minnesotans think taxes are about right. These households are more likely to feel better off than a year ago (by a 38%-17% margin), and 56% believe Minnesota is moving in the right direction. These respondents generally voted for Governor Pawlenty, and are likely to believe he has done a good job so far. They also approve of the work of counties by a 53% to 11% margin, yet 74% believe counties should respond to budget problems by reducing services or finding new ways to deliver services.

Responses on telephone survey to two specific tax-related questions:

Q: Which of the following statements best describes your feelings about taxes in Minnesota?			
	Our tax burden is too high	I would pay more in taxes to improve some government services	Our tax burden is about right
Overall	47%	23%	26%
Republicans	61%	11%	26%
Democrats	37%	35%	25%
Indep/Third party	45%	23%	27%

Q: Which option should your County use to respond to state aid cuts?			
	Reduce services	Find new ways to deliver services	Increase property taxes
Overall	16%	59%	10%
Republicans	18%	65%	4%
Democrats	15%	55%	15%
Indep/Third party	16%	57%	11%

3. Government reform

- When thinking about the impact of state and local budget problems, 61% of Minnesotans believe government needs to restrain spending and find new ways to deliver services, while only 33% believe the budget problems will result in painful cuts in services. Those who are concerned about the impact of the budget cuts tend to be respondents who are predisposed to pay more in taxes.

County Government

1. Understanding/approval of county government

- When asked to cite the level of government Minnesotans felt they knew the most about, 34% said state government, followed by city/township (24%), school district (19%) and finally county government (16%).
- City/township government was believed to provide the best value of services (27%), followed by state (17%), county (17%) and school district (12%).
- 55% of Minnesotans felt very informed or somewhat informed about the County Board and its activities, with 44% feeling not too informed or not at all informed. The “emerging majority” – metro residents , Pawlenty/Penny voters, 18-34 years-old – are somewhat less likely to feel informed about their county government
- Minnesotans approve of the work of county government by a 46%-17% margin, with 37% unable or unwilling to offer a viewpoint. People who feel informed about county government are far more likely to approve of the work of counties (62%-19% vs. 27%-15% for the less informed).
- Minnesotans feel they can have an impact on the way the County runs (77%-18%), and that their County understand the needs of residents (60%-26%). However, Minnesotans are concerned that they don't hear about big issues facing their area until it is too late (65%-30%).

2. County spending

- Counties are not looked upon as the primary driver of taxes or tax increases. School districts are believed to account for the highest level of property taxes (33%), followed by state government (22%), counties (14%) and cities/townships (11%). While 61% of Minnesotans believe their tax burden is increasing, state government is believed to be most responsible by 58% of them, with counties blamed by only 9%.
- When asked to identify the level of government with the primary responsibility for delivering a service, libraries were the only service readily associated with counties (50%). Minnesotans are more likely to link public assistance and welfare with state government (61% responding state, compared to 26% county and 9% city/township). They also believe the state is most responsible for transportation services (52% for state vs. 14% for counties) and city/townships most responsible for public safety (58% to 21%)
- People believe their county provides services in a cost-effective way (66% agree-23% disagree), and they think their County Board responds well to budget problems (57%-24%). However, Minnesotans are concerned that it is hard to keep track of how their County Board spends its budget (69%-20%).
- Minnesotans are divided as to whether there are too many unnecessary programs and services in their county (44% agree-46% disagree), but they believe the state imposes too many mandates on the counties (52%-17%).

3. Response of counties to budget problems

- Finding new ways to deliver services (59%) was far more popular among Minnesotans than reducing services (16%) or increasing taxes (10%). However, only 43% of the “new ways” respondents believe their county will follow that approach (over half of the rest think taxes are going to be raised).
- Minnesotans generally support the current level of spending on individual county services. They are more likely to support spending increases for public health services (45%-11%) or public safety (36%-5%), and more likely to oppose spending increases in social services (30% believe spending should be decreased vs. 24% increased).
- When asked to evaluate different reform proposals, Minnesotans strongly supported more shared delivery of services (88%-5%) and outsourcing (71%-17%), but did not support consolidation of counties (38%-45%), particularly in Greater Minnesota.

Other Findings of Note

- 1. Public employee perceptions.** Respondents in the poll who are employed by government are more likely to believe that things are off on the wrong track in this state (66%-30%), are less informed about county government than the rest of the populace, and are no more likely to watch a county board meeting than any other citizens. They are also less likely to believe services are provided in a cost-effective manner and less likely to believe their county understands the most critical problems facing their area.
- 2. Key demographic gaps.** Among poll respondents, there were insignificant differences in views based on age, gender or income gaps regarding the role and effectiveness of county government. However, core city residents feel less informed about county government (only 40% feel informed vs. 55% for the general public), are far more likely to support tax increases (46% support vs. 23% for the general public), and believe the state is headed in the wrong direction (60% vs. 25% right track). However, core city residents are the only major group willing to pay more for social services.

Rural residents are better connected to county government, with a higher percentage saying they know county government best, and they have a better understanding of the county role in human services, public safety and transportation.

Audit Findings

The following are key findings from one-on-one interviews with 35 senior legislators, statewide news media, representatives of business and labor, public policy and opinion leaders, county commissioners, county administrators and county service providers. Analysis of these interviews indicates significant common ground between county and non-county respondents. Himle Horner also analyzed these findings based on growth versus non-growth areas, instead of Metro versus Greater Minnesota, to better reflect the challenges facing Minnesota counties based on demographic commonality, not geography.

Counties are well respected

Nearly all of the people interviewed indicated that county government in Minnesota is well respected. It is considered an important level of government responsible for implementing programs and services mandated by the state. In addition:

- Many felt that counties have little control over what they do, but manage to do a good job with it.
- Counties have a strong connection to the people they represent. Proximity to constituents is an important strength shared with cities, townships and schools.
- Several people mentioned that the perception of county government is changing – counties within the Metro and in Greater Minnesota are becoming more progressive as new, younger commissioners with diverse professional backgrounds are seated.

Counties provide cost-effective services

Many audit respondents believe that counties provide cost-effective services but identified threats that will make this more difficult in the future. People in county government said that beyond the loss of revenue from cuts in state aid, mandates and the guidelines that govern them are often too restrictive. It was also mentioned that poor communication with the state is a critical factor hindering counties' ability to provide cost-effective services.

Several non-county audit respondents, particularly legislators and people in state government, felt that the level of effectiveness varies from county to county. They identified barriers that will restrict the future effectiveness of counties in delivering services -- recent cuts in state aid, lack of vision, duplication of services between levels of local government, ineffective delivery model, lack of creativity, a lack of cooperation between counties and other levels of government and a minimal appetite by counties for structural reform. Other observations include:

- Counties are considered good stewards of public dollars.
- Although it falls short of substantive reform, cooperation/sharing services are an important component to improving cost effectiveness for some counties.
- The lack of a state directive (or incentive) for land use and service planning for non-metro counties will result in land use conflicts and mistakes in future years.

The counties' role as service provider is very important

Counties are primarily considered a valuable extension of the state, delivering essential services locally (i.e., human services, public safety, roads). This model places counties in the position of delivering services closer to the people who are served by them, a service delivery model that would be too challenging for cities to execute and too distant for the state. However, some non-county respondents, including legislators and public policy leaders said counties sometimes fail to prioritize services and eliminate outdated or non-essential functions. In addition:

- Social services, public safety and roads were consistently mentioned as the most important functions counties provide.
- Least important functions include licensing, economic development and weed inspection.

Perceptions of Specific Services Provided by Minnesota Counties

<p><u>Social Services</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do a good job with a very difficult function. ▪ Considered one of the most important services provided by counties. ▪ Seen by participants from counties as providing available “safety net.” ▪ Opportunities for more partnerships with non-profit and private sectors. 	<p><u>Public Safety</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do it very well. ▪ Considered one of the most important service of county government. ▪ There are significant opportunities for cooperation with cities (e.g., patrols are duplicative, shared dispatch, overlapping jurisdiction). 	<p><u>Roads / Transportation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do a good job without adequate resources. ▪ Some criticism that counties rely too much on the state, more responsibility should be shifted to counties. ▪ Several county respondents feel there is room for collaboration with cities and other counties for plowing, road maintenance and other public works functions. 	<p><u>Environment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Counties do not do this well. ▪ Not considered an essential or priority service—other levels of government could do it better. ▪ Not adequately funded to be effective. ▪ Duplicative with what cities and the state are doing, creates confusion for residents / businesses. ▪ Some rural counties expressed frustration with MPCA/state, not enough support. Do not spend enough time locally. 	
<p><u>Fiscal Management</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Counties do a very good job managing public funds ▪ Seen as a generally conservative spenders; not wasteful ▪ Auditor function is important. Some mentioned that elected auditor may not have proper credentials to do the job—more of a beauty contest. 	<p><u>Economic Development</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Counties are not good with this function. ▪ Should be left to cities and private sector. ▪ County role could be as a supporter of local initiatives; partner 	<p><u>Community Health</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Generally do a good job. Seen as a valuable service ▪ Have difficulty with mandates-expected to do a lot with very little ▪ Opportunity for better collaboration between counties ▪ Have trouble recruiting nursing staff-compete with private sector (e.g., hospitals, clinics) 	<p><u>Land Use Planning</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Best left to cities. ▪ Opportunity to better collaborate with cities ▪ No state mandate for comprehensive planning outside of the metro – would be helpful ▪ Important, but not considered essential county function 	<p><u>Parks and Recreation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not much knowledge about what counties do in this regard. ▪ Role varies county to county ▪ Valued, but not seen as essential ▪ Some wonder “why counties?” vs. city and state

Mandates from the state and population changes pose challenges for counties

Nearly all audit respondents pointed to the inflexibility of mandates, particularly those that are unfunded or underfunded, as a significant barrier to local government efficiency. But, several respondents perceive that counties have not done enough to encourage changes in Minnesota’s mandate system. Specific opportunities that were mentioned include encouraging reform of the county service delivery system to be more results / outcome oriented, improve county accounting systems to be more transparent — increasing accountability for how dollars are used and where dollars may be falling short, and identifying unreasonable mandates that the state should consider repealing.

The second most frequently identified challenge is related to Minnesota’s changing population patterns. In counties experiencing growth it is more difficult to stretch limited resources to meet the needs of residents. And, in counties where population growth comes from new immigrants, there are challenges created by cultural and translation needs.

Among counties losing population, the ability to efficiently provide services is a challenge. In these areas, the population is spread outside of traditional regional centers making accessibility difficult. Also, aging population and the drain of younger residents to more urban areas are straining already limited financial and community resources.

Perceptions of Primary Challenges for Minnesota Counties

<u>Mandates</u>	<u>Population Growth</u>	<u>Population Loss</u>	<u>Regional Planning</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Often unfunded or underfunded ▪ Provide little room for flexibility or creativity in service delivery ▪ Considered a necessary evil: consistency among counties in services provided is good, important tool for defragmenting delivery system ▪ Legislature should be more sensitive to what is being mandated and whether funding is provided ▪ More consolidation/sharing needed to meet mandates ▪ Block grants would be more helpful and encourage creativity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth makes it challenging for counties to meet the need and expectation of residents. • Strains on transportation, transit, infrastructure and social services • Several growth counties are facing pressure from immigrant populations (e.g., demand for social services, translation services, cultural) • Need more funding of law enforcement and public safety • Puts pressure on county staff and administration • Aging population means shift in service demand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Population loss and aging are forcing change in how counties provide and fund critical services. • Increased demand for services, financial impacts, loss of workforce/replacement workforce, etc. • Cuts in state aid further exacerbate the problem, don’t know where the dollars will come from to meet needs. • Feel they have been responsive--already share services with other counties (not so much with cities), use dollars responsibly, have cut as much as they can from services, mandates often are unfunded/underfunded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Each county and city within the Twin Cities area required to submit comprehensive plans that show land use and transportation planning into the future. ▪ Without a similar mandate in Greater Minnesota, the level of comprehensive land use planning is highly variable. At times, this puts Greater Minnesota counties in conflict with surrounding cities and townships regarding land use and transportation planning. ▪ Hinders vision and long-term strategic planning, which can help save resources and identify opportunities.

Changes in state aid will require and result in more collaboration and/or service cuts

Respondents from county government indicated they would most likely cut services to make up for losses in state aid. They also indicated support for collaborative agreements to more efficiently provide services and would favor redesign of programs and services. However, county government respondents appeared to have little appetite for other types of substantive reforms.

Non-county respondents show a much higher willingness to embrace reform and expect counties to find new ways to deliver services. This includes eliminating inefficiencies and redesigning priorities. A few legislators said they were frustrated that counties did little to prepare for cuts in state aid even though they knew they were likely. This lack of action means that county governments are now being forced to make even more difficult decisions.

Respondents indicated that changes in Minnesota’s economy and the hardening of an anti-tax climate in the state mean that more significant reform in county government, not short-term stopgap measures, are needed. The budget crunch local governments will feel is likely to continue into 2005 and beyond, further exacerbating the need for reform.

Perceptions of Reform Ideas for Minnesota Counties

<u>Joint Powers</u>	<u>Sharing Services</u>	<u>Outsourcing</u>	<u>Revenue Raising Authority</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strong support ▪ Depends on service to be shared; must be appropriate ▪ Important tool, especially in rural areas ▪ Use is fairly common now ▪ Can be tough to manage politics of JP boards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strong support ▪ Widely used already ▪ Use should be determined function by function ▪ Can help reduce duplication ▪ County regionalization provides positives in service delivery (e.g., saves resources, efficiency) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support ▪ Needs to be closely watched for accountability; protect public interest ▪ Use would be situational; depends on service ▪ Used quite a bit already by counties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lukewarm support ▪ Not an immediate priority ▪ Concerns include potential confusion among taxpayers, need for the tax to be transparent and the potential for this reform to cause friction between counties.

<u>Merging Counties and Schools</u>	<u>Shifting Responsibilities</u>	<u>Consolidation of Counties</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Little support ▪ Did tempt some to want to learn more, but interest does not imply support ▪ Concern that both entities are too big to merge; would create an unwieldy government level ▪ Could provide benefit in providing social services through schools; now duplicative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lukewarm support, some interest in better understanding how this could work ▪ Cynicism that other levels of government would be willing to accept more responsibility ▪ Questions regarding funding availability for new services ▪ Would have to be determined on a case by case basis ▪ Could help eliminate duplication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimal support ▪ Political hot button, highly controversial ▪ Fear counties would lose identity/history ▪ No public clamor for consolidation ▪ Concern that people would lose access to county officials, services. ▪ There is already resistance to regionalization in Greater Minn.

Public has minimal understanding of county government

Overall, audit respondents believe that the general public neither understands county government nor chooses to pay attention. They believe this creates confusion over the roles and responsibilities of county government versus other levels of government and a lack of clarity over how county government is financed. Some legislators perceive that the lack of awareness and apathy hinders the public’s ability to hold county commissioners accountable for its actions.

Several respondents indicated this knowledge gap stems from poor communication by counties with their constituents and a lack of substantive media coverage (e.g., media does not cover county government as thoroughly as it does city and state government).

Respondents perceive that only a small segment of the general population is knowledgeable of county government roles and actively keeps up to date on issues related to their county. Additionally, audit respondents perceive the following:

- People who receive county services or have an “ax to grind” with the county typically have a better understanding of who their commissioner is and how to access the county.
- Public apathy remains significant regardless of county outreach and education programs.
- This lack of engagement can have significant ramifications when counties need to generate public support (i.e., budget issues in legislature that can impact counties, local actions that have implications).

How audit respondents view different levels of government

Audit respondents were asked to compare county government with other levels of government. Many audit respondents believe that when compared to other levels of government, recognition of counties ranks somewhere in the middle. People tend to have a better understanding of townships, schools and cities because of their close proximity to the people they serve. State and federal governments are less understood, seeming far away or unapproachable for most people.

<u>Schools</u>	<u>Townships</u>	<u>Cities</u>	<u>State</u>	<u>Federal</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ well managed▪ provide clear role and functions▪ accessible▪ benefit of professional staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ limited staff and resources▪ close relationship with constituents▪ accessible/personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ generally equal to counties▪ good staff▪ well managed▪ accessible▪ people seem to have a clear understanding of what they do	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ bureaucratic▪ seen as experts▪ less accessible▪ public may not have a clear understanding of role	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ bureaucratic▪ large▪ not accessible by public▪ limited understanding▪ daunting

Conclusions

Survey

- **Minnesotans continue to be apprehensive about the political climate.** While most Minnesotans believe the quality of life of their local community is high, they are not yet confident that Minnesota is emerging from the several-year slump. Minnesota's political climate continues to encourage change, rather than preserving the status quo.
- **The public has little appetite for tax increases.** With 75% of Minnesotans either anti-tax or satisfied with the Pawlenty approach to living "within our means," there is a limited constituency for a pro-tax agenda. If anything, the anti-tax position appears to have hardened since the 2002 election.
- **Minnesotans expect government to reform.** There is limited support for "blowing up the system" (such as significant consolidation of counties or massive reductions in county spending). However, the public wants reform before increased taxes or drastic service cuts – they want governments to find new ways to deliver services and to work together better.
- **Minnesotans had generally positive views about counties, but do not have a clear picture of how counties impact their lives.** A large percentage of Minnesotans do not feel well informed about counties. Residents who feel well informed about their county are more likely to approve of the county's work, more likely to believe counties understand the most critical needs of residents, and less likely to believe they are told about problems too late. County spending is not very transparent, further affecting the public's lack of clarity about county government.
- **County services are not identified with the most critical issues facing Minnesota.** The most critical issues for Minnesotans (jobs, education, health care) are believed to be the primary responsibility of other units of government. Meanwhile, human services are the major cost driver for counties, but it is the most unpopular form of government spending.
- **The public wants counties to reform service delivery, but not necessarily reduce services.** Minnesotans expect local government to reform service delivery, not relying solely on funding cuts, program reduction or increased taxes as a means to making up for budget shortfalls.

Conclusions

Audit

- **Counties are considered agents, not agenda-setters.** Counties are viewed as service delivery arm of the state. Restrictive mandated service delivery guidelines make it increasingly difficult for county government to set their own agendas. There is perceived to be minimal, if any, coordinated planning between counties and other local units of government. Meanwhile, the general public does not have a clear understanding of the challenges associated with mandates and expect that county government can set its own agenda. This fosters the perception that county government is not visionary.
- **Taxpayers lack the same understanding of county priorities/services as policymakers/opinion leaders.** The general public is apathetic toward the “forgotten” level of government (counties) – they pay the bills but do not really know what they are getting in return. Compared to other levels of government counties are less distinguishable, making them disappear into the fabric of the “institution of government.” This lack of understanding makes it difficult for counties to build needed public support or involvement on important issues and initiatives. Creating more visibility, outreach and educate is a critical need for counties.
- **Counties are not viewing reform in the same context as taxpayers do.** According to the telephone survey conducted for AMC, the public clearly expects county government to “hold the line” on cutting services, but the audit indicates counties are hearing “cut services.” Additionally, taxpayers expect counties to reform how it delivers services, but counties instead hear more collaboration. Although joint powers agreements and shared services are important tools for improving efficiency, it does not equate to substantive reform in how county government operates. This disconnect between what the public expects and what county government is hearing could become problematic in the future.
- **Changing demographics will also drive county reform.** Whether counties are gaining or losing population, this shift is making the delivery of services more challenging for counties. The shift in population is likely to prompt the need for reform in how services are provided.