

Niagara County - does not have a county charter

Demographics¹

Niagara County is the largest county in New York to employ the county manager form of government with just over two hundred thousand residents. The county covers about five hundred square miles and the population density is about four hundred people per square mile. Median home value is eighty thousand dollars and the median household income is thirty-eight thousand dollars.

History of the County Manager position

Niagara County's transition to a county manager is relatively recent. Before adopting a new local law, Niagara County was governed by committee. There was a movement to create a county executive position, but the referendum was defeated by voters. Gregory Lewis started as Niagara County's first professional manager on May 27, 2003 after a national search. There was a regional search prior, but that search was not successful in locating a candidate.

Niagara County does not have a comptroller, but they do employ an auditor appointed independently of the county manager. The auditor checks samples of the manager's work and will investigate any problem areas as directed by the legislature. Lewis says that he has a good working relationship with the auditor and they can work together to ensure proper expenditures of county dollars.

Lewis' contract runs for four years and provides a severance if he is terminated for any reason. If he is terminated for misconduct, however, he does not receive the severance. The contract he uses is a standard ICMA county manager contract with a few minor adjustments.

¹ <http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/popInfo.php?locIndex=22487>

Budget

In preparing the budget, Lewis divides all essential county services into five tiers: 1) safety and security, 2) services for the vulnerable, 3) infrastructure, 4) building community, and 5) an integrated, streamlined administration. The first three are the major focus of money disbursement.

The budget process begins in April. The budget team - the county manager, the budget director, the budget clerk, and the county manager's administrative assistant - meets with each department head to discuss their preliminary allocation, which is based on trends. Each department then uses their own budget team to meet the target. Once the budgets of all departments are filed, Lewis checks the tiers to ensure proper distribution across all departments.

The entire process is typically completed by the beginning of October. It is then up to the Legislature when they want the budget to be presented. In 2004, the Legislature saw the budget in October and spent many weeks debating the issue. In 2005, an election year, they chose to wait until mid-November for the budget to be presented.

Department Heads

Lewis uses two panels to assist him in deciding which candidates should be hired as department heads. An internal panel, consisting of legislators and other existing department heads, holds interviews with top candidates. An external panel, consisting of other county leaders that are not county employees, sit in on interviews in which questions are asked by the county manager and then provide feedback about the candidates.

Lewis' appointments must be approved by the Legislature. In the sixteen years he has served as a county manager, two of his appointments have been rejected. In those cases, he must start again or appoint one of the other candidates from the search.

Politics

Lewis stressed the importance of calm professionalism in successful county managers. Teaching others that you are professional, respectable, and can be trusted goes a long way to breaking down barriers. A manager looking to share the spotlight with elected officials is much more likely to encounter conflicts. If the legislature is resistant to new ideas, a manager simply moves on and presents the idea anew at some point in the future, possibly with a new presentation perspective.

While elected department heads may possess more actual power than those who are appointed, most work with the manager in the same way during the budgeting process. People skills, especially those for dealing with difficult people, are essential to work with anyone and everyone in the county. If there is an unresolvable conflict, the legislature is often more wary of other elected officials than their professional manager.

Lewis' opinion on the hybrid form

If a county chooses both a county manager and a county executive, the most important task is to clearly define the roles between them and how to resolve conflicts. A county, like Erie, that has urban, suburban, and a bit of rural area might lend itself to conflicts. If a county executive ties themselves to the city, they may garner the votes for election, but their policy focus may conflict with the manager who is focusing on the county as a whole.

Additional documents available for reference:

- A. Interview with Gregory Lewis, transcript, October 2004
- B. Niagara County 2006 Tentative Budget, powerpoint presentation, November 15, 2005
- C. County Manager budget, spreadsheet comparing the 2004, 2005, and 2006 budgets
for the department
- D. Niagara County Organizational Chart
- E. Niagara County Manager job requirements
- F. Niagara County local law establishing the office of county manager, 8/6/02, 15-4
- G. Niagara County local law establishing the duties of the county manager, 12/2/03