

GUIDANCE TO SUPERVISORS FOR PROPOSING A PROGRAM EVALUATION TOPIC

Lisa MacKinnon, Sustainability and Program Evaluation Coordinator
Office of the County Board

The County Board rules (§7.13(7)) give the Executive Committee the duty and responsibility “in conjunction with the office of the county board, (to) oversee program reviews and audits conducted by county board staff or contractors, and review the results thereof.” The Executive Committee initiates this process by soliciting ideas for program evaluation topics from the full County Board. Sometimes it occurs at the end of a year to prepare for the following year and at other times the process happens in the new year with an understanding that the evaluations conducted that year will not affect that year’s budget process. As the Program Evaluation Coordinator for the Office of the County Board, my role is to take the program evaluation topics selected and prioritized by the Executive Committee and position those evaluations for successful implementation that yields information that can be used by the County Board to make more informed decisions and policies regarding the subject programs.

Program evaluations are conducted by the County Board not just to respond to a perceived problem with a program; they are good practice for providing current, comprehensive information and emerging best practices on which we can base policy and budget decisions. The County Board Office’s program evaluation process has increasingly been employed to evaluate topics within the county’s jurisdiction to gather information that informs future policy making.

This process includes: working with the Chair and County Board Supervisor(s) who proposed the selected topic to define the objective, scope, timeline, and deliverables for the evaluation; drafting the RFP(s); working with the Chair of the Executive Committee to appoint and convene subcommittees of supervisors to oversee the vendor selection process; working with relevant Dane County department staff to gather useful input from them regarding the program topic and to facilitate their cooperation in the evaluation process; convening and working with various staff to do initial and final review and scoring of submitted proposals; scheduling interviews of preliminary vendor selections, when necessary; convening and staffing the subcommittees that conduct the interviews of the vendors; staffing the subcommittee meetings where final vendor selection recommendations are made to the Executive Committee; drafting the contract for purchase of services; drafting resolutions relevant to the contract and shepherding them through the standing committees to the County Board; negotiating with the selected vendors on cost and other terms of the contract; convening and facilitating internal staff and supervisor work teams to provide input throughout the program evaluation process; working with the selected consultants to facilitate every aspect of the program evaluation from contract start to the final presentation of findings to the County Board.

The Executive Committee has the responsibility for choosing evaluation topics proposed by supervisors.

Proposals by supervisors for program evaluation topics should include:

- 1) A description of the scope (who, what, when, where, which programs, functions, people, etc.);
- 2) The actionable potential for the county board/ potential benefit to the county of doing the evaluation (what questions or concerns will this evaluation address and what will this information help the county board do?)
- 3) Whether a report and recommendation from the program evaluation is sought to be used for the next year's budget period (RFPs for evaluations must go out in January of the previous budget year in order to be able to inform the upcoming budget).

A few things to note:

- It is the responsibility of supervisors who propose a program evaluation topic to **work with staff** to develop the scope and timeline and to **consult with the relevant standing committee and department staff** to ensure that they are aware of critical operational details that might affect the success of the program evaluation being proposed. One possible approach to this is discuss with your department head(s) and place an item on your next standing committee agenda for committee members and staff to review any ideas for useful program evaluation topics.
- In most cases, a subcommittee of the Executive Committee will be convened to review RFP responses and, in some cases, to interview finalists for the project. **It is the responsibility of subcommittee members to take their role seriously**, to attend to information about the program evaluation as they receive it, and to alert the Executive Committee Chair and the Program Evaluation Coordinator immediately to any concerns they have about the topic or the process, especially if they are uncertain about the necessity for the program evaluation.
- **For program evaluations that are budget-sensitive**, i.e., where the outcome of the evaluation is intended to inform the budget decision making process for the next year, RFPs must go out by January. Therefore, any program evaluation topics intended to inform the coming budget year should be selected and approved by the Executive Committee by November or December of the previous year. This allows time for the RFP process, including contractor selection, and for the evaluation to be completed with findings and recommendations in time for the next budget requests. This is especially important where multiple projects are selected to proceed simultaneously.
- Topics selected and approved after this time cannot be guaranteed to have an evaluation complete in time for budget consideration for the following year.
- Program evaluation topics selected later in the year should be done so with the intention that they would not affect budgeting for the upcoming year, but for two

years down the road. This approach allows for the proposing supervisor to spend more time gathering advance information about the topic from department staff, allow the Executive Committee some flexibility in deliberating on the topics, and allow for more strategic phasing of projects. For example, depending on the scope and complexity, an evaluation selected and initiated in mid- 2021 would likely affect the 2023 budget rather than the 2022 budget.

Where possible, encourage collaborative project development in advance of proposal to Executive Committee

In the past, project topics that were put out for RFP and then cancelled might have avoided that result if the supervisors asking for the project had spent more time in advance talking with the staff of the departments or programs they were proposing to evaluate *before* making their proposal to the Executive Committee.

This would allow the proposing supervisor to find out what, if anything, was being done currently in the department or program to address the question(s) they are trying to answer through the proposed program evaluation. In some cases, it might make sense to wait on proposing a program evaluation until the outcome of similar activities already underway within a department is clear.

Another reason why communicating with the department in advance makes sense is that departments can help anticipate the best timing for the project that will allow for their full participation and availability as an information resource. This will help with developing the timing of the RFP in a way that makes it possible for the department to cooperate and assist with the process. I have found that department staff are generally very cooperative and helpful in gathering information for data requests, scheduling their staff for interviews, etc. if they are given enough advance notice.

One of the things that holds up the process is when we have to do “damage control” mid-stream with a department or agency after the project scope and timelines have been set and the RFP has gone out. We try to avoid this on the staff end by meeting with department staff as a part of the RFP drafting process to ask if they have any additional input given the scope developed by the supervisors, but this should happen earlier and more consistently at the program evaluation topic proposal stage. I would recommend that this should occur initially by being taken to the relevant standing committee for discussion and development, and then additional discussion could occur with relevant department staff as needed.

Thank you for your consideration of this information and the recommendations. I would be happy to sit down with you to discuss this further so that we can move forward with a process that works effectively and optimizes the benefits of this process for the County Board.

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