

What Does County Government Actually Do?



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After nearly 12 years as a Chester County commissioner I still received confusing looks at times when I told people what a county commissioner does, how the government that I was elected to oversee serves them and how it definitely impacts their lives.

It was enough to drive this former commissioner to distraction, and I'm sure commissioners across all 67 counties completely relate or soon will as your term begins. But I smiled and carried on. What is it they say ... people only truly understanding things when they have reached a point of readiness? And if that's the case, why is the point of readiness so elusive and infrequent when it comes to local government understanding?

We all know that we can explain things over and over ... provide the most eye-catching well-written literature and even point people in the direction of the county website that explains exactly what each county department does. Chester County makes efforts to explain in detail the programs and services provided. The county has reached out through On the Road evening commissioner meetings, through six-week free School of Government classes, and even informal Coffee with the Commissioners events (and in the summer, Ice Cream with the Commissioners—yum!). And in this social media-driven world, county staff does their best every day to highlight examples of what Chester County government actually does. All of these

efforts help, but really only reach a small percentage of citizens, and usually those who want to learn more because they are already engaged in their local community.

ENGAGEMENT

Speaking of engaged citizens—I love them. And in Chester County we are lucky to have so many who support their local community: who volunteer, who support senior centers and non-profits, who look after our parks and trails, who serve on authorities, boards and commissions, who are volunteer firefighters and EMT's, and who stand up for what they believe to be right.

More recently, the latter group—those who stand up for what they believe to be right—has increased. Not just in

Chester County, but across the state and the nation. This is a good thing, as long as there is an understanding of which level of government they should be addressing to voice their thoughts, their rights and their requests. It is your role as a county commissioner to respond to and help direct all engaged citizens in their efforts to find answers, to help their neighbors and possibly even to seek elected office positions themselves.

Although let's face it, sometimes we can all relate to dear Leslie Knope of TV's Parks and Recreation, who said, "These people are members of the community that care about where they live. So, what I hear when I'm being yelled at is people caring loudly at me."

Which brings me back to communicating what it is Chester County (and every other Pennsylvania county) government does; how programs and services impact our citizens' lives. CCAP's resources can help a lot with this, and Chester County will be the first to say that we have taken CCAP's good ideas ... its template leaflets, articles, letters and press releases ... and tailored them for the Chester County audiences. But three consecutive terms as a commissioner—attending public meetings, speaking engagements, tours of county government funded organizations and non-profits, check presentations, ribbon cuttings—and of course chicken dinners—helped me to come up with another approach to summarize for our citizens what county government does (and doesn't do) in Pennsylvania.

In true David Letterman fashion, I have summarized it as a Top 10 list.

TOP 10

"What county government actually does (and by inference doesn't do), and how it impacts you."

10

Property Assessment

or "We set the rate, and you pay us a bit of your overall property tax, but don't blame us for your total property tax bill."

The Assessment Office maintains the assessment rolls that are the basis of property taxation for counties—but also for your own municipality and your school district. Staff maintains property values to assure fairness, equity and uniformity; they oversee the process of determining property values and update county tax records; and they hear assessment appeals when you think your property is reported to be worth more than you believe to be true.

Oh, and property taxes don't cover every county government program and service. A big portion of revenue comes from federal and state monies.

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Voter Services

or "On Election Day we run the show, count the votes and post and verify the results. And every other day we do a lot too!"

Voter Services is responsible for all aspects of running elections under the state's election code in Pennsylvania, the federal National Voter Registration Act and the Help America Vote Act. Counties accept and verify new and changed voter registration applications, find and train poll workers for election days, process absentee ballots, find polling places throughout the county and verify and report election results. Voter Services also purchases and maintains all election equipment, and pay for all primary, general and special elections.

8

Courts and Corrections

or “Everything you see on ‘Law and Order’ including detectives, prosecutors, judges, courtrooms and the county prison. But we don’t have the catchy ‘doink doink’ sound track.

County government operates the Court of Common Pleas, district courts and all of the services related to both—probation, parole and pretrial services, juvenile probation, domestic relations, jury service, court reporters, court administration, and three areas that require full explanations in themselves(!) - the Clerk of Courts, the Prothonotary’s Office and the Register of Wills/Orphans Court. (That is another Top 10 list on its own!)

We also operate specialty courts and community corrections including Veteran’s Court, Drug Court, Mental Health Court and Recovery Court. The county also has responsibility for the District Attorney’s Office, the Public Defender’s Office and the county detectives.

Then there’s the Sheriff’s Office, which is responsible for the safety and security of all county buildings and courts, prisoner transportation, Sheriff’s sales of real estate property, serving warrants and a comprehensive K-9 unit.

7

Transportation

or “Chester County does not own any roads.” We have 95 bridges, but no roads. Period.”

All roads in Chester County are either owned by the state or by local municipalities—so one thing we don’t do is fix potholes; but the county can identify whether a road is either state or locally-owned so you can know where to go to report a pothole! Although the county does not own any roads, it does own 95 of the bridges in the county and have a bridge crew and work with PennDOT to maintain or replace those bridges.

Through the Planning Commission, Chester County works alongside PennDOT and its planning organizations, to ensure that transportation infrastructure meets the needs of our citizens and businesses, now and especially in the future. The county also funds paratransit and medical assistance transportation services, and offers input on public transportation services.

Did I mention, we don’t own roads?

6

Planning and Land Use

or “We’re the fastest growing county in Pennsylvania. We have no choice but to plan, and we’re good at it too!”

Chester County’s Planning Commission addresses issues such as where we should grow, housing needs and environmental protection, while helping to account for future demand for services.

One key word—Landscapes³. The county’s Comprehensive Plans, Landscapes and Landscapes², were so good, it adopted a third one! In everything that Chester County commissioners do, they plan. There is no better example of this than the Landscapes series that has helped the county to manage tremendous growth, and to set Chester County up for a predicted 30% growth in the next three decades.

So yes, Chester County prepares comprehensive use plans—including transportation and environment planning. The county also reviews the planning, zoning and subdivision proposals of all of our municipalities, and provides advice (we cannot enforce) to make sure there is consistency in land planning throughout the county.

It also uses really cool Geographic Information Systems to analyze spatial information (look up spatial) and databases.

5

Open Space Preservation, Parks and Trails

or “Green Acres is the place to be—and Chester County’s 30-year investment in them is paying dividends.”

Open space preservation programs provide county park and recreation opportunities, preserve significant natural and historic areas and encourage revitalization and development of urban areas. Thirty years ago, Chester County was the first in the region to formally set aside funds for rigorous open space preservation, and today, nearly 30% of Chester County is permanently preserved including over 500 farms, public parks, homeowners’ associations and nature preserves. Chester County’s investment in open space has also leveraged millions more dollars in funding from private landowners, conservancies, the state and municipalities.

Chester County manages six county parks that hold annual events like Sheep and Wool Day and the Old Fiddlers’ Picnic, as well as educational programs and community activities. The county has built and maintains more than 21 miles of open regional trails with more miles to come.

The great news is that a recent Return on Environment report evaluating the true benefits of open space preservation in Chester County confirmed a significant increase in the value of homes located close to preserved green spaces as well as savings in flood control, air and water pollution mitigation and health benefits.

4

Environmental Services

or “We love our natural resources and have some great (some would even say geeky) experts who make sure they are protected.”

It is the county’s responsibility to work with local municipalities, state and federal governments and agencies to protect and restore critical natural resources. Chester County does this through its Water Resources Authority and its Conservation District.

Staff in the Water Resources Authority ensure Chester County provides flood protection, reservoir water supplies, storm water management and water science, information and planning. So, when it rains a lot—or doesn’t rain a lot—our water resources people are called by the media to explain why(!) and what it means for everyone who lives here.

The Conservation District staff promote sustainable use of natural resources including soil conservation. They assist builders, contractors, developers, farmers and others in developing conservation programs—bringing together local, state and federal agencies to design creative solutions to many conservation and pollution issues.

3

Emergency Services

or “9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

When you call 9-1-1, you are contacting the emergency call center run by the county. The 9-1-1 call takers—formally known as telecommunicators—then dispatch the relevant first responder service located across the county. So, they take your 9-1-1 call, then immediately contact the local police, fire or emergency medical service organization located close to you.

But the Department of Emergency Services is responsible for so much more. It prepares and rehearses all-hazards emergency response plans in coordination with federal, state and local agencies. It leads local and regional homeland security planning and it supports the volunteer recruitment and retention efforts of our first responders.

The county also has built and operates a state-of-the-art Public Safety Training Campus that helps all of our 5,000 first responders train separately and together to prepare for every emergency situation that could come our way.

TOP 10

2

Health and Human Services

or “Meeting the most critical service needs that protect the most vulnerable citizens in Chester County.”

The biggest portion of Chester County’s \$500+ million budget comes from federal and state grants that help to provide programs and services that the county must provide. Programs and services that help our children and young people including fostering and adoption; those suffering from drug and alcohol addiction; individuals with intellectual disabilities or who suffer from mental health issues; our seniors and elderly citizens; and those experiencing homelessness.

Chester County also has a long-term healthcare facility, Pocopson Home, that offers medical and nursing services, and a Youth Center that provides special programs for youth who are receiving services from the County’s Juvenile Probation Department and the Department of Children Youth and Families.

The county’s Veterans Affairs Department offers benefit information and application services to all veterans and their families.

And Chester County’s Health Department is nationally accredited to provide public health clinics, environment health services, public health education, and wellness programs for Chester County businesses.

And, if you want your well or sewer inspected, Chester County government does that, too. It also inspects all restaurants and eating establishments. But it does not do both restaurants and sewers in the same visit! Eww.

1

Everything Else

that isn’t a township, borough, city, state or federal government responsibility!

OK—so limiting all of county government’s responsibilities into a Top 10 means that the final point becomes a catch-all listing of services.

You want to get married? Contact our Register of Wills Office for your marriage license (makes sense, right?).

Need a dog license? ... a hunting license? ... a fishing license? ... a small-games of chance or bingo license? Contact our Treasurer’s Office.

Selling or buying a house and need to record the deed? Contact our Recorder of Deeds Office (that one makes sense, too!).

Want help with your passport application? Have your photo taken at Chester County’s Sheriff’s Office then walk down the hall to the Prothonotary’s Office to complete and send off the application.

Want to research your Chester County family ancestors or find out about Chester County’s 337-year history, visit the Archives and Records Office (they are definitely history geeks and you will love them).

And, there you have it. One former county commissioner’s attempt to explain what county government actually does, and indeed, how the roles and responsibilities of county government really do impact the residents and businesses of the county. There is SO MUCH MORE that counties do, but hey, this is a start. Have it on hand when you come across anyone who is actually at that elusive point of readiness.

Feel free to beg, borrow or steal any of the Top 10 and tailor it for your own use, for your public meetings, your social media posts and to hand out at your chicken dinner events. Who knows, maybe even one day, when you explain that you are a county commissioner, someone may come back at you to say they actually know what county government does!

Then again ... 🍷