



Strategic Planning Final Report

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North Dakota Association of Counties Strategic Planning Report

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Executive Summary

New Leadership and a New Planning Approach

NDACo's current three-year plan, 2019-2021, is now nearing its conclusion at a time of change for the association. To manage the planning process, NDACo brought back Jason Matthews of JM Strategies LLC who facilitated planning projects in 2016 and 2019.

Early in the discussion phase for this planning process, new NDACo Executive Director Aaron Birst and the planning team expressed the desire for a different planning approach. The process that was developed and implemented differs in some notable ways from previous processes.

Two Online Surveys

Per Birst's preferences and in consideration of broader trends within county governments and state government, a survey on the current state and future of county government was administered. This survey consisted of nine questions, which focused on:

- Familiarity and awareness of NDACo's purpose, programs, and services;
- Identifying levels of concern with a range of challenges facing county government; and
- Creating a wish list of priorities for NDACo to focus on as it works to ensure strong and efficient county government over the next several years.

NDACo emailed the survey link to county officials. The survey was available for two weeks starting on March 28. Responses were received from 391 individuals.

A second survey of NDACo staff was sent in mid-April. This survey, with a few revisions, was mostly identical to the 2019 internal survey. Nineteen staff members participated in the survey, which had three primary purposes:

- 1) Review and evaluate NDACo's mission, vision, and services;
- 2) Identify organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges; and
- 3) Determine any common themes or issues that should be discussed in the planning process.

A Board-Driven Planning Process

The information from these surveys provided the framework for the June 2-3 planning session, which was held in Bismarck at NDACo's offices. Unlike previous planning sessions, which tended to be heavily influenced by staff and prior management, Birst and NDACo Board President Carrie Krause wanted a planning session driven by members of NDACo's Board of Directors. Invited staff sat in on the general planning session as observers, providing clarification on programs and services while also answering directors' inquiries. Staff did participate with directors in smaller group break-out sessions.

As facilitated by Matthews, a thorough and engaging discussion was held among all directors about the future of NDACo, but also – more broadly – on the future of county government in North Dakota. Again, this marked a departure from previous planning processes, which tended to be more directed on internal NDACo matters.

As a result, the directors focused on developing a strategic plan that is more narrowly focused on positioning NDACo as (1) a catalyst for change within county government and (2) deepening NDACo’s role as a resource to assist county governments in meeting specific and, in some cases, pressing needs.

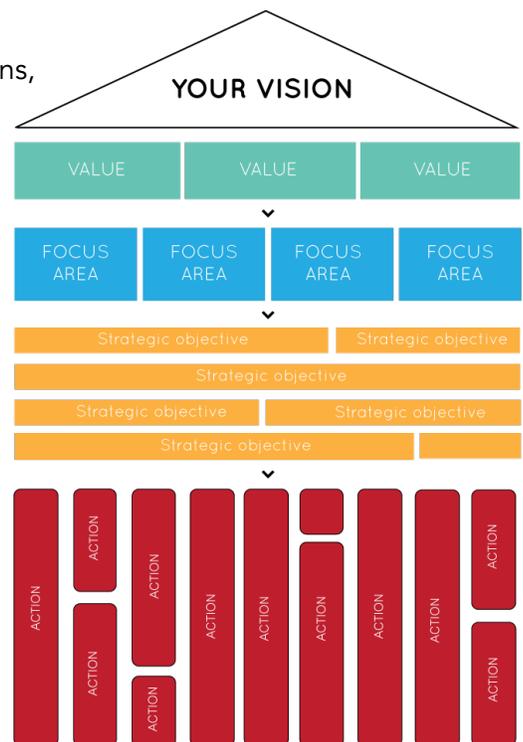
A New Planning Model for NDACo

Based on the desires of NDACo’s new leadership and in consideration of the issues raised in board discussions, the new strategic plan fits well with the Cascade strategic planning model.

Unlike NDACo’s previous goals-based strategic plans, a Cascade Strategic Plan will allow for greater strategic alignment by establishing clear metrics and ensuring organization-wide accountability.

Additionally, the model is perfectly compatible with NDACo’s existing mission, vision and purposes. In reviewing the purposes, it is clear these fit well as values.

- **Mission:** NDACo provides leadership and services to foster effective and efficient government for the good of all counties.
- **Vision:** NDACo will be the recognized leader in proactively addressing challenges and opportunities affecting local governments.
- **Purposes (Values):**
 - **Exchange:** Provide a means for the exchange of ideas, information, and experience of all county officials
 - **Educate:** Promote continuing education of county officials
 - **Facilitate:** Facilitate cooperation with other levels of government
 - **Advocate:** Propose and support legislation for county governments
 - **Engage:** Engage in other activities that strive to achieve more effective county government in North Dakota
 - **Participate:** Participate in other activities permitted by law in furtherance of NDACo’s objectives



With the mission, vision, and purposes/values already established, the key points from the June 2-3 planning session naturally lead into the establishment of the remaining elements:

- **Focus Areas:** What NDACo will be focusing on to address to help in its progress.
- **Strategic Objectives:** What NDACo wants to achieve.
- **Actions:** How NDACo will achieve – implement – its strategic objectives.

Once these have been clearly established, the NDACo board and staff will assign person(s) or teams with responsibility for each strategic objective and set deadlines for implementation.

The next section will specifically outline the framework for the new strategic plan, which is then followed by the results of both online surveys.

NDACo's Strategic Plan Framework

A Focus on Strategy, Rather than Operations

In the June 2-3 planning session, the NDACo Board of Directors had a wide-ranging discussion. The talks were prompted by both the survey results and concerns about the future of county government in North Dakota.

From these facilitated conversations, clear themes emerged related to innovative approaches to address ongoing county workforce challenges, strategies to tackle behavioral health, and providing relevant services and try new approaches to meet specific needs.

The consensus was NDACo can further strengthen its value to counties by becoming a catalyst for change and driving force providing innovative and practical solutions and support. In other words, what emerged from the discussions, was a plan truly strategic in its outlook and on focused on the needs of counties.

A Key Takeaway: Trust NDACo's New Executive Director

Matters such as reorganization, finances, board and staff recruitment, etc. – some of which featured prominently in past plans – were matters labeled as operational and to be addressed in the future by the new executive director. Some of these decisions will no doubt be influenced and determined by the final make-up of the strategic plan.

Focus Areas that Emerged from the Planning Session

From the board discussions, two focus areas emerged:

- 1) Multi-county partnerships and regional collaborations, and
- 2) relevant and responsive to counties' needs.

Each focus area clearly embraces key points brought forward in the planning session, concerns raised and ideas shared in the 'State and Future of County Government' survey, along with the new executive director's overall desire to focus on county governments' needs.

Furthermore, and very importantly, when the Cascade planning model is applied, it is evident these focus areas also fulfill NDACo's mission and vision while also touching on many of NDACo's purposes (values).

Focus Areas and Topics for Strategic Objectives

Focus Area 1: Multi-County Partnerships & Regional Collaborations

- **Fulfilling NDACo's Mission:** NDACo provides leadership and services to foster effective and efficient government for the good of all counties.
- **Fulfilling NDACo's Vision:** NDACo will be the recognized leader in proactively addressing challenges and opportunities affecting local governments.
- **NDACo Purposes (Values) Being Fulfilled:**
 - **Exchange:** Provide a means for the exchange of ideas, information, and experience of all county officials
 - **Facilitate:** Facilitate cooperation with other levels of government
 - **Engage:** Engage in other activities that strive to achieve more effective county government in North Dakota
- **Topics to Address in Strategic Objectives:**
 - Sharing Services
 - Sharing Workforce
 - Collaborative Approaches to Behavioral Health

Focus Area 2: Relevant and Responsive to Counties' Needs

- **Fulfilling NDACo's Mission:** NDACo provides leadership and services to foster effective and efficient government for the good of all counties.
- **Fulfilling NDACo's Vision:** NDACo will be the recognized leader in proactively addressing challenges and opportunities affecting local governments.
- **NDACo Purposes (Values) Being Fulfilled:**
 - **Educate:** Promote continuing education of county officials
 - **Facilitate:** Facilitate cooperation with other levels of government
 - **Engage:** Engage in other activities that strive to achieve more effective county government in North Dakota
- **Topics to Address in Strategic Objectives:**
 - Salary Studies
 - Law Enforcement Training
 - Emergency Management
 - CDL Training
 - Cooperative Purchases
 - Revamping ILG
 - Engagement within NDACo
 - Engagement with the Public

Recommended Planning Format

Per the desired wishes of Aaron Birst and Carrie Krause, finishing the strategic plan now moves internally to the board and staff. Over the next four months, work will be done to finalize the plan. To aid in this process and with the intention of helping ensure as simple a process as possible, the following planning format is recommended:

Strategic Objective:	<p>Addresses one of the topics raised in the board discussions (along with any other topics and/or needs).</p> <p>Elements of the strategic objective include: Specific action + outcome.</p> <p>Example: <i>Develop a new public engagement plan.</i></p>
Actions to Achieve Key Result:	<p>Actions that will implement the strategic objective in a systemic manner.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. First step B. Second step C. Third step (and all other steps as necessary)
Responsibility:	<p>Staffers and/or committee of board members assigned to implement the strategic objective.</p>
Deadline:	<p>Firm deadline for implementation of the strategic objective.</p> <p>Other deadlines for individual actions should be established by the responsible individuals/group.</p>

Appendices

Findings of Online Surveys

A. State & Future of County Government

Topline Findings

Familiarity with NDACo and Awareness of NDACo's Programs & Services

- **General Familiarity:** Sixty-five (65) percent are either very or moderately familiar with NDACo. In contrast, 35 percent are somewhat, slightly, or not familiar with NDACo.
- **Programs & Services:** Digging into the numbers, combined totals of responses for those stating they were somewhat, slightly, and not aware outnumbered numbers for those who are very and moderately aware for the following programs/services: County Officials Academy, Human Resources Services, Juvenile Justice, Next Generation 9-1-1, Records Management, and Traffic Safety Coordinator.
- **Grading NDACo:** One-hundred-fifty-nine (159) respondents gave NDACo a grade of 'B.' In contrast, 126 assigned a grade of 'A,' 62 gave the organization a 'C,' and seven selected a grade of 'D.' No one gave an 'F' to the organization. Comments shared by participants were very positive and complimentary of staff.

Biggest Challenges Facing County Government

In priority order, participants identified as very or moderately concerned with the following:

- Rising costs of health insurance and health care (234 very / 108 moderately)
- Restructuring of NDPERS Retirement (191 / 155)
- Lack of qualified workforce (161 / 125)
- Shifting of government service delivery from local to state (157 / 118)
- Inability to compete for workers (154 / 122)
- Fewer local revenue options – greater reliance on state and federal funding (130 / 130)
- Less control over decision-making (117 / 124)
- Growing reliance and cost of technology and/or automation (102 / 155)

Top Five Priorities for the Future of County Government

When asked to look ahead to what county government should look like in 2040, participants selected the following five issues/areas (from a provided list) as their top five priorities:

- Greater local budgetary and taxation control 256 responses
- Increased state funding 236
- Increased county and city joint service delivery 228
- More multi-county efforts 213
- Increased number and extent of county services 209

Common Themes

In addition to the challenges and concerns listed above, four common themes emerged from the comments provided. The first is the loss of local control to the state. The second, which ties into the first concern, are complaints about the new social services zones. Third, ongoing challenges around finding and keeping qualified workforce. And, finally, ever-present concerns from rural counties about the influence and power of urban counties.

Survey Results & Responses

Please Note: Responses are listed as they were provided.

Q1: How many years have you been directly involved (or employed) in county government?

- 20 or more years 113
- 11 to 19 years 97
- 6 to 10 years 86
- 3 to 5 years 64
- Less than 2 years

Q2: Please select the option that best captures your county's population size.

- 2,000 to 5,000 residents 113
- 25,000 and more residents 93
- 10,000 to 25,000 residents 74
- 5,000 to 10,000 residents 71
- Under 2,000 residents 40

Q3: Please select the option that best captures your role within county government.

- Official* 128
- Employee 114
- Administrator or Division Director/Manager 96
- County Commissioner 53

*Auditor, Treasurer, Recorder, Clerk of Court, State's Attorney, Sheriff

Q4: How familiar are you with the North Dakota Association of Counties (NDACo)?

• Very Familiar	131
• Moderately Familiar	123
• Somewhat Familiar	75
• Slightly Familiar	42
• Not Familiar	20

Comments:

- Appreciate all you do for the counties
- I'm very impressed with the service and responsiveness of the Association. You provide a very value to members. Thanks!
- Push the legislature for more funding from state for non-oil producing counties. Since they passed the Prairie Dog bill our counties haven't received much or nothing at all.
- I work for the Public Health Unit, so do not know about any of the following programs and services.
- When first elected to the commission, I was relieved to learn from others that I could go to NDACo for help with my new responsibilities.
- I've only been here since Sept. of 2021 so I'm not super familiar with NDACo. I did go to the convention in October 2021 and was very glad I did.
- I've been in various county governments for many years and find several similarities between North Dakota and other states.
- Doing a good job as what I can see. Going to miss Terry's expertise.
- Mostly aware of county officials being involved.
- NDACo is known to the county officials, but not to the county employees. What role does it play in their careers? What benefits does it offer them?
- Used services numerous times.

Q5: Please rate your level of awareness with the following NDACo programs and services.

	Very Aware	Moderately Aware	Somewhat Aware	Slightly Aware	Not Aware
Annual Conference & Expo	201	55	48	34	51
County Employers Group (CEG)	112	80	80	52	66
County Officials Academy	122	63	55	47	101
Drug & Alcohol Testing	106	96	70	53	66
GIS Program	57	102	74	58	92
Human Resources (HR) Conference for Local Government	66	81	76	53	110
Human Resources Services	76	89	82	58	82
Institute of Local Government (ILG) Professional Development	172	65	42	35	74
Juvenile Justice	32	55	76	74	149
Legislative Services	126	74	60	55	71
Legislative Wrap-Up	158	63	45	59	64
Next Generation 9-1-1	52	66	69	71	131
NRG Technology Services	110	73	60	60	85
Publications (County News, Leader Letter, Annual Report, legislative newsletters, blog, etc.)	171	88	60	33	36
Records Management	90	90	90	44	74
Traffic Safety Resource Prosecutor	44	56	68	70	150
Vision Zero	97	111	77	50	54
Website (ndaco.org)	174	92	55	34	35

Comments:

- Again – not so visible or accessible by non-officials
- Human of the programs directly benefit county employees?
- Human Resource info needs to be further advanced, or sold/educated, to the county level. Some do not understand the need for, nor want to spend the necessary funds.
- I believe NDACo is a very valuable resource for county governments. Why reinvent the wheel if you don't have to? You all know what other counties are doing for the most part, so networking in this association is very important. I am always there for my counties that surround me and I know that they are there for me (in my position).
- I've used the website to look up ILG courses.

- Increased Human Resources focus to assist rural counties to attract qualified work force.
- Less you know, the better off you are.
- No idea some of these existed as programs. Need to do a better job at letting employees know about these programs.
- One thing that makes the association so valuable is the wide variety of services you provide.
- Records management is one of the hardest parts of my job. The descriptions are hard to match to what the reports. Classes showing what records should be kept and for how long would be greatly appreciated.
- Still learn every day.

Q6: Based on what you know about NDACo, what grade would you give the association?

• A – Excellent	126
• B – Above Average	159
• C – Average	62
• D – Below Average	7
• F – Failure	0

Comments:

- Always helpful and just a phone call away.
- Donell and Aaron Birst do a very good job communicating with the Sheriffs.
- I feel that we are very informed as to what is going on and that the resources are easy to find.
- I have not been working in this state long enough to provide a meaningful rating. The meetings I have attended have been well-planned and staff have been supportive and helpful.
- I just don't know enough to comment
- I'm not familiar with all it can do but am pleased with how helpful everyone has been when I've had questions.
- I've only worked with NDACo a few times. For what I needed, they were of great assistance. I was not aware of all of the various programs and services.
- If I were to say Excellent there would be no room for positive growth :-). No room for complacency.
- In my role as State's Attorney, Birst is an INVALUABLE resource and the person who takes over for him is going to have some BIG shoes to fill.
- Limited information available from NDACo regarding salaries of county employees and elected officials; difficult for counties to know what is the average salary for comparison when offering positions.
- NDACo is a very effective organization and great resource to the member counties. I wish the townships had an organization as effective. NDACo has never disappointed when I need help with questions regarding my role and responsibilities.
- NDACo is a wealth of knowledge and always willing to help.
- Need to get more input from the employees
- Not a lot of communication with services. NDACo seems to work with the smaller counties and leave the others with nothing. My department personally.
- Our county does not share your association with the employees, limiting our ability to join in on the issues. I would like more information given. 3/29/2022 2:04 PM 19 The lobbying efforts could be more robust.
- The association has always been very helpful to me and our county with answer questions and providing suggestions for addressing issues.
- The lobbying is a key to what you do for counties
The Association has been outstanding in everything that they do.
- The staff has always been very helpful. Lots of great resources.
- Very good at disseminating information.
- While Juvenile Justice is a topic included in this list, interestingly, child welfare is not. This has historically been a county responsibility and now with the advent of ZONES becomes even more important to have great information. States' attorneys added the responsibility for the ZONES regarding personnel and child welfare, but little in the way of support. This is an area of need.
- Work hard for county employees... Have the best needs in mind.

Q7: We are now going to ask you to identify what you feel are the biggest challenges facing county government. Please identify your level of concern about the following challenges facing county government.

	Very Concerned	Moderately Concerned	Somewhat Concerned	Slightly Concerned	Not At All Concerned
Less control over decision-making	117	124	80	43	22
Fewer local revenue options – greater reliance on state and federal funding	130	130	69	36	22
Lack of qualified workforce	161	125	60	25	17
Inability to compete for workers	154	122	69	26	17
Rising costs of health insurance and health care	234	108	37	8	3
Restructuring of NDPERS Retirement	191	155	84	28	20
Growing reliance and cost of technology and/or automation	102	155	84	28	20
Shifting of government service delivery from local to state	157	118	74	20	19

Comments:

- 1) Inefficiency of the 'elected officials' model, specifically the inability to ensure quality work from elected officials. 2) Collaboration with municipalities. 3) Effectively working with legislators to affect changes needed to 'fix' NDCC provisions that create inefficiencies, duplications and/or perpetuate outdated practices. 4) Disconnect between the demographics/age of elected commissioners versus citizens [and misalignment of priorities].
- All concerning.
- Biggest concern is with making sure we are able to higher and keep quality employees that will make us more effective and efficient as a county
- Biggest concern is with training of new and old county officials. The ability to use, accept, and promote technology is a concern of mine. My local county still does not offer direct deposit for paychecks, financial records are not digitized to match required paper records, and many county officials refuse to effectively use emails, digital scanners, etc.
- Communicating with residents as platforms diversify and more and more emphasis is placed on digital media
- Control versus what's best for counties needs to be looked at.
- Do NOT remove local control. Do NOT cap the ability to tax appropriately to fund local government. Stop regionalizing services and local government.
- For many people talking to an actual person instead of an automated machine is so very important and keeping it as close to "home" as possible. Shouldn't have to call a machine in Bismarck for an answer to a question in Wyndmere.
- Human services-adequate local delivery of service and local costs are a huge concern.
- I am concerned about NDACO helping to facilitate more state control of programs with less local control of those programs such as juvenile system.
- I am probably more concerned with shifting of state government from state to local.
- I find it exhausting to read story after story about budget surpluses and high fund values (i.e. Legacy Fund) for the State while counties struggle for funding.

- I stand against shifting of government service delivery to state control. State gov has proven time and time again to be amongst the least efficient delivery system around. Too much bureaucracy, and not enough proven results that they are able to do it better than us. Additionally, there is too much lip service and empty promises at the beginning of the change from local to state control. Case in point, Social Service Redesign. What a disaster this has become in just the short amount of time the State has been in control of it. I fear what it will look like in another 10 years.
- I work in a county that zoned with a neighboring county. Our county is not the host county. Instead of a partnership between the counties, it has turned into a 'take over' by the admin county. Our county has seen our director less than 10 times over a span of roughly 2 years. When she would visit, she would make it a point to leave in 2-3 hours. We were not her priority, and there are many other examples related to the disadvantages of zoning. Staff morale is terrible. There is severe pay inequality between the zones. The state has more control than ever, yet continues to offer zero support when we need it. Our county and counties throughout North Dakota are suffering.
- I worked for the county for many years in Social Services. 25 actually. When the state stepped in, everything went south. The programs are highly regimented and unnecessarily burdensome, fewer people are being served, customer service is slowly and intentionally eroding, and it no longer is rewarding to work here. I'm retiring earlier than planned due to the redesign. My zone board feels useless as it is now an advisory board only and without any powers or authority. The state overrides anything contrary to state agenda. Some of my board members will be resigning at the end of their terms due to this. We do not get job candidates in the numbers we used to; In some cases, it is because of the bad reputation of working in the zone. I have a much smaller percentage of children in foster care now due to the state's "mission". Note... I can't think of a single removal of a child that I did that didn't need to be in foster care to protect them and every child was reunified or had a permanency plan within a reasonable time. But now we can't even help families unless they do something significantly wrong that gets them in either the child welfare system or Juvenile Services. What's happening to the children? I can't help families anymore in the way I used to. That's why I'm leaving.
- I'm not concerned about shifting of services to the state. Frankly, that would be easier in some instances (i.e., social services is a mess how it is set up now and it creates more work to have the State and county involved). My primary concern is the increasing costs of labor, technology, etc. and the limited options for revenue. The state is quick to provide unfunded mandates, but refuses to increase our mills to account for the increasing duties.
- Keeping quality people when the wages are lower than everyone around. The per dollar an hour, is just not competitive. I feel the benefits help retain workers. I think the health insurance is good and the retirement is great but the hourly wage is what is lacking.
- Less local control over decision-making
- Local County Human Resources is a huge issue; Accountability of officials and employees to represent their counties; Shifting of services from State to Local
- Losing local control is hard to understand as it is the most basic of our rights to elect our government officials who should be working for us. Competition for workers is hard. State control is not the answer. We have seen too much of that at several levels now. Prioritization of essential services is necessary.
- Loss of volunteers for EMS forcing districts to pay full-time staff which in turn requires additional mill levy to pay for 24/7 coverage.
- Lots problems small countries (population wise) losing workers. Can't compete with large ones. State trying take over human services and taking zone workers away also not funding enough facilities to send children many more thoughts and concerns but main ones for now.
- Need for more services to help the mentally ill. More services to help correctional facilities handle these incarcerated individuals.
- Our county should have more to say on certain issues. Example - every property owner has to follow zoning regulations that our county put into place. But NDIC doesn't have to adhere to zoning at all - they just allow development where ever they want. Doesn't matter what it is zoned.
- Our Social Services support is horrible since the State took it over. But hey the lucky guys who work for the State now make a lot more money.
- Really concerned about NDPERS when I am this close to retirement.
- Seeing for the past decade of the state shifting various services that were once available in rural areas and counties, being moved to the larger 10 metropolitan cities. These include having District Judges holding in-person court proceedings to Social Service Regions that are too large and spread out and DMV services.

- Should the day come when Human Service Zone employees (formerly county) become state employees, the transition to a monthly paycheck is *extremely* difficult. Employees must be given ample time to prepare for this type of transition; better yet, the state would transition to a twice monthly pay system to meet needs, especially given issues with inflation and ever-rising costs. There is also concern for the lack of parity in pay across the state; this does not help more rural areas recruit and retain qualified staff. We also need to take a hard look at how legislation will and does impact service delivery; the recent youth justice changes that will roll out this fall will adversely impact Zone staff. There is no accountability for youth who engage in activities that harm the community; Zones do not have capacity to manage this new case load; staff have no training for this population's needs; there are no services to refer to; and there is no legal ability to sanction youth or transition them upward to the court if they do not engage or comply with case plans. Further, there is absolutely no accountability for parents in these cases; our current system is allowing parents to literally dump their children off because they are "too difficult" and "don't listen." So, the expectation is that the zone will take custody and "fix" the youth which leads to staff sleeping in offices because there are no placements. Parents need to parent. Life at home may be less than ideal; however, youth still need to be held accountable and so do their parents.
- Social service zones etc.
- State offices in general have no clue how we operate at a local level or what unique issues we have at local levels nor do they care. Local counties are too far removed , especially rural counties to even make a blip on the states radar for concerns or issues.
- State over reach into the county government concerns me greatly.
- The Social Service zone program took away from services that clients receive. This is probably going to be the same results when the state does the same with county health departments.
- Too many services are moving to the state level, which undermines local government.
- We need local control but with flexible state funding sources.
- When we shift from local to state, we are making the smaller counties smaller and only making the bigger counties bigger. Shouldn't we be growing small towns? Some of us have relationships and connections in our small towns and if we don't have local government, we lose our jobs and services.
- While it's great to have state leadership - counties need to be able to serve their own clients, clients need to know that they can call and talk to their own worker - not the intake line where they have to repeat the whole story. These people have it hard enough without being juggled around more.

Q8: We want to look ahead to the future and have you identify what county government should look like in 2040. From the list below, please select the TOP FIVE items/characteristics you'd like to see for county government.

1) Greater local budgetary and taxation control	256	
2) Increased state funding	236	
3) Increased county and city joint service delivery	228	
4) More multi-county efforts	213	
5) Increased number and extent of county services	209	
6) Having fewer elected officials	118	
7) Less dependent on state	99	
8) Fewer multi-county efforts	48	
9) Other (please provide additional ideas or comments)	45	(See below)
10) Having more elected officials	44	
11) Decreased number and extent of county services	35	
12) More legislative restrictions on local budget and taxes	27	
13) Less county and city joint service delivery	25	

Other Responses:

- A lot of things are good as is. We just need to be able to continue them.
- Assistance determining roles and responsibilities with water issues & conflicts, especially multicounty situations.
- Better coordination/funding with townships to help w/roads, bridges, repairs, etc.
- Better marketing or education campaigns to help the public understand what county government does/policy education and also recruit quality people to serve on appointed boards and commissions.
- Better salaries
- Better training for elected officials. 53 counties and 53 different ways of doing the same task.
- Comparable employee benefits throughout the state
- County officials know what is best for their counties. Leave us to moderate our issues.
- Decrease state control over counties
- Development of services throughout the state - not just large counties / regions in the eastern part of the state and capital
- Elected positions are a waste as people take advantage of century code benefits, needs to be accountability.
- Equitable distribution of state revenue to meet the needs of large population centers
- Fewer townships
- Focus on work force development in the next 10 years- so in 2040 counties are competitive for staff and are able to hire highly qualified staff to provide much needed services to rural North Dakota citizens. Good paying – we have qualified well managed county positions.
- Greater help of law enforcement funding.
- Greater use of online presence and digital documents.
- Having the financial resources to adequately keep up with the services we need to offer.
- Help sustaining the local volunteer first responders in rural areas - our numbers are decreasing at an alarming rate
- Higher pay
- I am quite concerned about our NDPERS since I will be retiring in 1 1/2 years and having bought in for 5 extra years making a total of 22 years when I retire. if they stop or run out of money for our Social Security and then our NDPERS is messed with also as well as stock market going down the tube, what was the point of trying to put money away for retirement?
- I would like the smaller counties have the same percent of money allocated to them as the larger counties
- I would like to see the State take over the Human Service Zones.
- I would put into place the same restrictions on elected officials as employees, less corruption then could take place
- If state mandates they should fund.

- Improve the county services by being more knowledgeable about our departments, other departments and other counties, and having quality employees that are effective and efficient.
- In smaller counties, do not like that one person in the courthouse holds many positions.
- Increased use of technologies to communicate with citizens and serve their needs (e.g. electronic payments, electronic records requests)
- Increases in State Aid need to be a priority.
- Involvement of county staff in decision making models
- Less state government intervention in county activities.
- More efficient in delivering services to citizens (e.g. increase technology, outreach, and stop doing things because "we've always done it this way". More interaction with local legislators to increase visibility and insight to county government at the state level (most still have NO idea how county government works and the role it plays).
- Please look at rural fire and EMS and how the county may have to get involved for those counties that don't have hospitals
- Providing of full state funding for mandates imposed upon prosecution, law enforcement, jails, and chemical addiction/mental health services.
- Rolette County tax base decreases every year, yet we need to fund extended county services. Not feasible.
- Sheriffs should be appointed, not elected.
- Tax office move to be controlled by state
- The swing to more local control needs to be part of the future of counties discussions. I believe this comes at a cost to the tax payer and not a savings because they all still want the service counties provide.
- These don't have any explanatory descriptions so I cannot make an informed choice. What kind of services, efforts? less funding for what projects? how high of taxes and on what?
- This county was providing high quality customer services and worked diligently to serve and protect the community prior to Zone. This is slowly whittled away.
- Tough times call for tough measures. Some of the services that Counties provide are not necessary and could be handled by other resources in communities. With money currently sitting idle in North Dakota it can be used towards many things that counties are mandated to do by the state but are not funded by them.
- Unfunded state mandates (tax valuation software for example)
- We need to put an end to state control and zoning of county social services / human service zones!
- Wish the state would just take Social Services and be done with it. This silly zone business is for the birds. Too many bosses and not enough workers.

Q9: Please provide any other thoughts or suggestions you may have.

- Am concerned of the governments funding focused for the programs for more liberal programs and ideals. Taxpayer dollars seem to be trending more focused for people who seem irresponsible than those who provide those taxes.
- Am really worried for county workforce due to upcoming retirements and not being able to afford the starting wages.
- As an employee, it has becoming increasingly strained in the Human Services field that an employee in another county/zone has a much better "benefit package" that some county zones. Given the upcoming redesign - I am fearful that many employees will leave, taking with them a wealth of knowledge in Human Services.
- Concerned about the NDPERS retirement and restructuring proposals.
- County Auditor and Treasurer position should have to have some type of finance or accounting degree as well as experience with budgeting.
- Flexibility with scheduling - a more modern approach to the new generation of workers besides the wages.
- How to make lives/areas better for all, not this section or that section. City vs County vs Township versus school versus residents versus state. Working together better.
- I feel statewide - we need to consider having a political practices office to oversee elections. This isn't the old days where a gentleman's handshake used to work and there is a lot of out of state money that gets handed down to certain campaigns.

- I hope that the things your organization provide become more accessible to the employees and not just the elected officials. Because of the status of election, some seem to think that they cannot show up for work, not do a good job etc.
- I would like to see a session at our annual convention where we could ask for a legal opinion on concerns related to spending county funds on a road that the county does not own, and the consequences to the county should they decide go forward with the project.
- I'd like to see more interactive meetings between Counties and NDACo during the Legislative Session. The weekly emails are not enough. Weekly phone calls with NDACo that would include any and all interested County Officials, where NDACo provides updates on bills of concerns, and allows County Officials to interact via telecon would be very beneficial
- In North Dakota, we need to continue to grow small communities and keep the working people at work. Not take their work away and make more jobs available in bigger cities.
- It may assist the locals to avoid duplication of effort, if NDACo had liaison positions regionally to encourage teaming up with cities and counties.
- It would be good to see NDACo provide more intel from the state on a continuous basis instead of just during the legislative session. No fancy and time-consuming blogs and videos, but just email updates throughout the year to anyone that is interested. Often a lot of communication is tied up in Committees and with Elected Officials and the information that is disseminated doesn't actually get to the people doing the work and developing/implementing the County's strategies.
- Local control is important. Legislation doesn't realize the differences in between each county. One size doesn't fit all. Population, traffic, road and bridges vary greatly.
- Make sure the NDPERS Retirement System stays solvent.
- More state funding for local gov. Less control of what we can and can't use funding for. More funding for infrastructure and roads and bridges.
- NDACo has bound itself to the associations of the elected officials, which will create difficulty in dismantling the outdated structure of elected Auditors, Treasurers, etc. I am hopeful future Boards and Mr. Birst will embrace *new* ideas and strive to be progressive in moving Counties and NDACo forward in coming years...not just sustaining the status quo.
- NDACo should strive to meet the needs of members by embracing technology for meetings and conferences.
- Please look for more feedback from counties related to how things are going since the formation of zones.
- Shifting some decision making to the state has in some cases significantly slowed down the whole process.
- Standard and more restrictions on how counties use funds need to be reviewed
- The county needs a 2.0 redevelopment. We can't keep doing things the way we have for the last 100 years.
- The needs of our rural communities are not the same as the needs of our bigger communities. A one size fits all does not do justice to our communities.
- The rural counties have a great workforce to utilize. Let's not slowly move everything to the big cities. Let's start the shift back to rural America, where we have space, lower taxes, and the ability to work.
- We can't compete with workforce recruitment and demands of county responsibilities without greater taxing authority or options.
- We don't get paid enough and it's disgusting.
- While I do support the State in managing and providing benefits to the counties, I do not support the State using programs and funding opportunities as a way to have control over County elected officials.
- Would like the State Tax Department oversee County Tax Directors rather than be at the whim of County Commissioners who may have conflicts of interest.

B. NDACo Staff Survey

Please Note: Specific comments relating to internal operational issues have been left out of this copy of the report to ensure the anonymity of employees is respected.

Topline Findings

SWOC Analysis Findings

- **Strengths:** Staff, advocacy, knowledge, reputation, relationships
- **Weaknesses:** Member education and engagement, internal operational issues
- **Opportunities:** New leadership, member engagement
- **Challenges:** New leadership, lack of staff resources and time, turnover of elected leaders (at both the county and state levels), member engagement, diverse needs of counties, and differences between rural and urban counties

Assessing NDACo

- **Grading NDACo's Mission:** A large majority (12 out of 19) give NDACo an 'A' for fulfilling its mission to foster effective and efficient government for the good of all counties. Six gave a grade of 'B' and one person selected 'C.'
- **Grading NDACo's Vision:** Grades were mixed on NDACo fulfilling its vision to be a recognized leader that proactively addresses the challenges and opportunities affective local governments. Nine gave a grade of 'A.' Another nine staff gave a grade of 'B' and one person awarded a 'C.'
- **Reviewing NDACo's Purpose, Services, and Qualities:** Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with a number of statements about NDACo's purpose, services, and qualities. There was no disagreement that NDACo provides valuable information, effectively promotes and provides continuing education, champions legislation for county governments, strives for more effective count government, provides exceptional value to counties, and assists county governments to better serve their constituents. However, there was some small disagreement that NDACo's purpose is clearly understood and whether it provides exceptional value to counties.
- **One Thing NDACo Does Really Well:** Communication with members, member/customer service, education, advocacy, and leadership
- **What NDACo Can Do Better:** Communicating its need and value, internal communications, new programs to meet needs, and diversifying board representatives (positions and counties)
- **What One Change Would You Make to NDACo?:** Reexamine board structure, improve internal communications and culture
- **High Priority Strategic Goals:** Review and possibly update NDACo structure, engaging younger county officials, future of pensions, training and technical assistance
- **Big Idea for NDACo:** Trainings for county commissioners, secure state funds of EMS services, connecting counties with one another, "relationship academy" for county officials

Key Takeaways from Staff Survey

This staff survey stands out from the 2019 survey in a few noticeable – but not insignificant – ways.

- **Change of Leadership:** First, there is some apprehension about the change in NDACo leadership. This is not surprising. Change is always difficult. It is also very understandable considering Terry Traynor’s longevity and familiarity. And while some staff are apprehensive, others embrace the opportunity that comes with the change.
- **NDACo’s Workplace Culture:** Second, there are evident concerns in the comments regarding the current state of NDACo’s workplace culture. This is likely, but not solely, connected to the leadership change. It is likely these concerns have long been present, even pre-dating Traynor’s tenure as executive director. Still, they are being expressed openly and it is necessary for everyone to take note of this.
- **NDACo’s Structure:** The previous two take-aways tie in directly with the third, and final, takeaway. Based on comments stated and sentiments expressed, now may be the opportune time to review, and possible update, NDACo’s structure. Such an undertaking should be all-encompassing from a review of internal operations (identifying duplication and improving efficiencies) to board structure (representation among counties, adequate representation of different county positions, etc.).

Of these three takeaways, the Consultant argues that NDACo’s structure rises to the level of a strategic matter. The other major concerns regarding the change of leadership and workplace culture are operational issues. To be clear, workplace culture is a major issue that must be addressed and it provides Aaron with a major opportunity to make positive changes and leave his imprint on NDACo. But operational issues should not be specifically listed in the strategic plan.

However, general concerns regarding workplace culture can generally be addressed under a goal that would propose a review and/or update of NDACo’s structure.

Survey Results & Responses

Please Note: Responses are listed as they were provided.

Q1: What word or phrase comes to mind when you think of the North Dakota Association of Counties (NDACo)?

- Support (4 submissions)
- Professionals/professionalism (3 submissions)
- Leader (2 submissions)
- Counties working together
- Educational
- Excellence in local government
- For the good of all counties
- Government
- Partners
- Reputable and knowledgeable
- Strong association
- The voice of counties
- Together, we are stronger

Q2: In one or two sentences please describe the value NDACo provides.

- Collaboration, representation, advocacy and transparency. Helping counties serve North Dakota effectively and proactively.
- Dedicated and experienced staff. Legislative support.
- Educates county officials represents county interests in the legislature
- Good quality service and programs.
- Have valuable resources internally and relationships to provide reliable answers
- I think it provides a network of knowledge and help.
- Legislative guidance to counties and professional guidance in areas of governance, risk control, HR etc.
- Many resources and training.
- NDACo advocates for the value and integrity of North Dakota Counties by providing support and training where needed in order for county leadership to enhance decision making at the local level.
- NDACo provides a unified message on behalf of county government.
- NDACo provides a wide-range of services and leadership on diverse topics from taxation to loss control; grant-assistance to GIS. NDACo is a "one-stop-shop" for anything a county needs help with.
- NDACo provides legislative leadership representing every county in North Dakota with a unified voice... NDACo provides a wealth of information and services to the member counties.
- NDACo provides the tools needed for county government to be successful.
- Provides education and policy resource for North Dakota Counties.
- Provides representation of counties at legislature on county related topics, a source of information and a liaison between county officials and state officials. Provide services to counties, county officials and member associations to create efficiencies and education.
- Representing North Dakota counties in working with state government.
- The ability to connect and lobby as one and work through differences across the state and to educate.
- The NDACo provides education and guidance that adds security to our workplace.
- Works for the good of all counties, providing services that saves them money.

Q3: NDACo’s mission is: NDACo provides leadership and services to foster effective and efficient government for the good of all counties.

With this mission in mind, please rate your level of agreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don’t Know
NDACo’s mission is realistic in light of its available resources.	13	6	0	0	0
NDACo’s services are consistent with its mission.	13	6	0	0	0
NDACo’s planning and budgetary priorities are consistent with, and supportive of, its mission.	8	10	1	0	0
NDACo’s actions and decisions demonstrate an understanding of its role in supporting the work of North Dakota’s counties.	14	5	0	0	0
NDACo engages with counties and responds to their needs.	11	8	0	0	0

Q4: Overall, what grade would you give NDACo for fulfilling its mission?

- A – Excellent 12
- B – Above Average 6
- C – Average 1
- D – Below Average 0
- F – Failure 0

Q5: Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements about NDACo’s purpose, services, and qualities.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
NDACo provides valuable information and offers forums for the exchange of ideas for all county officials.	11	8	0	0	0
NDACo effectively promotes and provides continuing education for county officials.	15	4	0	0	0
NDACo effectively proposes, supports, and champions legislation for county governments.	16	3	0	0	0
NDACo strives to achieve more effective county government in North Dakota.	14	5	0	0	0
NDACo’s purpose is clearly understood by county officials throughout North Dakota.	2	13	3	0	1
NDACo provides exceptional value to North Dakota’s county governments.	14	4	0	0	1
NDACo assists and enables county governments to better serve their constituents.	13	6	0	0	0

Q6: NDACo’s vision is: NDACo will be a recognized leader in proactively addressing challenges and opportunities affecting local governments. Please indicate your level of familiarity with this vision.

- Very Familiar 12
- Somewhat Familiar 6
- Not At All Familiar 1

Q7: Overall, what grade would you give NDACo for fulfilling its vision to be a recognized leader in proactively addressing challenges and opportunities affecting local governments?

- A – Excellent 9
- B – Above Average 9
- C – Average 1
- D – Below Average 0
- F – Failure 0

Q8: Do you believe NDACo should change or modify its vision?

- No, keep NDACo's vision as is 16
- Yes, slightly modify NDACo's vision 3
- Yes, completely change NDACo's vision 0

Q9: What is a common criticism (or criticisms) that NDACo's critics make about the association?

- Cost of membership. Value of membership.
- Costly
- Counties sometimes share the thought that they would like to see us more often at their physical locations
- County employees still being unaware of all the services provided.
- Difficulty in representing all counties, as some may have differing views on various issues.
- Get information out to the counties
- Listens primarily to county commissioners. Voices of other officials do not have the same weight.
- Use of taxpayer funds
- Haven't heard any criticisms (6 responses)

Q10: What is NDACo's greatest STRENGTH?

- Advocacy for and information dissemination to its members so they are able to make better decisions at the local level.
- Communication to members
- Dedicated staff.
- Employees
- Good employees with good resources.
- Helping counties
- It's people (staff, board, and the counties of North Dakota)
- Knowledge
- Lobbying at the legislature and education and a reference.
- NDACo has the pulse of county government and knows how to address legislative and administrative issues.
- Relationships at all levels.
- Reputation
- Staff longevity. Great leadership.
- Strong leadership and team.
- The ability to quickly answer questions or find the resource to do so
- The counties' employees
- The participation of every county in North Dakota.
- The staff. Hard-working, collaborative, knowledgeable. Genuinely nice people.
- Their team is their greatest strength.

Q11: What is NDACo's greatest WEAKNESS?

- Defining the benefit and value to each county employee.
- Diversity
- Duplication of efforts. There are so many different non-profits, state and federal agencies, and other groups doing things that sometimes intersectionality is missed simply due to not having the time/person power to do everything.
- Educating members of the importance of standing together for the good of all counties.
- Engagement
- Hard to relate to struggles counties face with such tight budgets
- If a weakness is communicated, I am certain NDACo would resolve whatever weaknesses that may be communicated.
- In certain areas more staff or resources would benefit a need to address certain areas.
- Letting counties know of legislative issues coming up before they become bills (reactive instead of proactive)
- Maybe not being able to help with HR issues
- Right now, I would say the change of leadership, with Terry leaving NDACo there are big shoes to fill. Aaron will be a great director but will need to find the right way to move forward.
- Slow to respond to the changing needs in counties.

Q12: What is the greatest CHALLENGE facing NDACo?

- Adjusting to change in leadership (5 responses)
- County buy-in to some programs
- Educating officials importance of being engaged in legislation that especially affects local control and balance that with state support for local challenges.
- Engaging new leaders. Building quality relations with changing legislative body and leaders.
- Everchanging legislation
- Funding the organization
- Ideological differences (east vs west) and keeping a cohesive message
- Intervention from State and Federal Govt.
- Keeping all counties actively involved despite their diverse needs
- Legislation and making sure all counties are fairly represented.
- Resources - money and staff power. Certain staff have the candle burning at both ends ALL THE TIME! Like 24/7 365.
- Retaining value as information becomes easier to disseminate and access.
- Serving the whole state and not just the bigger counties.
- Turnover of elected leaders in the counties and related professional staff. It is important to educate new leaders as to the true value of the association.

Q13: What is the greatest OPPORTUNITY for NDACo?

- Adjusting to change in leadership (5 responses)
- Being a leader and resource for counties during challenges and state changes.
- Bring North Dakota together to understand the issues facing all
- Coordination of valuable targeted training and support for member associations.
- Educate more people
- Engaging county officials to be more involved in legislation that will benefit county government
- Expand areas that are surfacing as specific needs such as public health, risk management, HR etc.
- Keeping in touch with the counties
- NDACo always looks for new ways to be of service to the Counties. There is never any hesitation to see a need and then jump in. This trait is what drives opportunity for the Association.
- Engaging new leaders. Building quality relations with changing legislative body and leaders.
- Taking advantage of technologies to overcome distance
- The future
- Using training to educate new officials and develop leadership in the counties
- Utilizing our powerful voice to help protect county govt. from unwanted mandates
- Working with counties and being a part of a solution to help with the mental health crisis. What can we do at the county level?

Q14: What is the one thing NDACo does really well? Why?

- Education / ILG education and trainings (4 comments)
- Communication with county officials (3 comments)
- Customer Service (2 responses)
- Leadership
- Engages our county base effectively at all levels. There is a cultural passion to listen to our county base and assist them in every way possible.
- Has vast knowledge base on issues impacting counties
- Keeping up to date with legislative changes.
- Legislative advocacy and information sharing
- Legislative work. Our legislative team is the most influential and effective lobbying group in North Dakota.
- Responsive to requests
- Selection and retention of staff. Easily the most talented and capable staff in toto that I have ever had the opportunity to be associated with.
- Takes care of their employees. Never feel like you're a number when you work at NDACo. They appreciate the value of having dedicated employees so staff is treated well.
- Well organized and focused legislative effort.
- Work for counties.

Q15: What is the one thing NDACo needs to do better? Why?

- Better understand each county and make sure counties know what services that can provide
- Blow our own horn. Remind members of the accomplishments the organization and members have achieved.
- Board growth... education for board members
- Communications need to be enhanced - internally and externally
- Continued education of counties regarding what NDACo does
- Diversifying NDACo leadership – many representatives on the board, etc. are from the same counties.
- Explaining role so county officials feel comfortable using them.
- Get new county officials to see the value of NDACo. Lots of longtime officials are retiring. We need new officials to be educated about what we do.
- Give more state-wide recognition to their own staff. If they receive an award or a service award, send the counties an email. They are like "county employees" to each county.
- Make a concerted effort to support NRG Technology through our engagement with the counties. "Talk up" NRG and advocate the professional services they provide.
- Offering new programs that respond to today's county leader's needs.
- Telling our story people are overwhelmed with information, making it hard to be heard.

Q16: If you could make one change to NDACo, what would it be? Why?

- Internal operational improvements (5 comments)
- Have an email listserv for each functional area – maybe do already.
- Having someone research grant opportunities and making counties aware of opportunities.
- Internal communication could be improved
- Legislative leadership in all core program areas.
- Not a change, just to be sure it doesn't "spread" too much and lose focus
- Offering one or two department specific educational classes per year on new and upcoming topics
- Perhaps look at the current reporting structure to see if efficiencies and protocols could be improved or streamlined.
- Provide more opportunities for staff to interact with the board members.
- Retain Terry Traynor as a consultant on a long term basis.
- Smaller and better balanced Board of Directors. Seems to be dominated by commissioners even though they have their own association that is also served by the NDACo staff.

Q17: Please list any high priority goals you believe NDACo should address in the strategic planning process.

- How to engage new younger county officials; 2) Staff relations.
- NDACo structure; 2) Strategy to educate new county officials; 3) Best ways to prioritize legislative strategies.
- Analyze where and how county government's role is changing.
- Board growth and strengthen bonds how to support staff in their growth and challenges maintain uniformity in messaging
- Continue to provide high quality educational opportunities at the conference and during the year
- Get legislators to understand that if they replace pensions with 401k, they need to "buy us out" and it won't be cheap.
- I feel that any goals established during this process should be quantifiable, achievable, and measurable.
- Job performances
- Legislative planning and coverage plans for 2023. Onboarding of new executive director.
- Training and technical assistance
- When discussing goals in the planning process, hope those leading discussion will make sure how these goals are accomplished and additional work load involved are taken into consideration.

Q18: What is the "Big Idea" you have for NDACo?

- Internal operational improvements (breaking out of silos)
- "Walk a mile in my shoes." Have staff members spend a day in someone else's department to gain perspective on the services they are providing counties & how they may be able to interface collectively going forward.
- Good leadership
- Having a conference/training just for county commissioners. Having long time board members present their ideas of different ways to effectively be a leader. Discuss what is happening in various areas of the state so commissioners know some of the challenges throughout the state. Sharing ideas and stories is so beneficial and would help mentor future leaders.
- Like to see NDACO take the lead for more state money to support EMS services across state. EMS is vital to all communities and all who travel through our counties. Struggles to hire/retain paramedics & EMT's throughout the state.
- Pairing counties from opposite areas for a chance to get to know challenges and to bond with each other to strengthen our state.
- Relationship academy for county officials (targeted to auditors & commissioners) to foster better relationships by empowering them with broad knowledge on county procedures and operations.
- What would a completely (or nearly-completely) virtual office, with employees spread throughout the state, look like?

Q19: Please provide any other thoughts or suggestions you may have.

- I'm satisfied with the work they do for the counties.
- It has been a privilege to work here because of the professional staff and the ability to work with dedicated county officials and employees.
- Offering one or two department specific educational classes per year on new and upcoming topics.
- Spotighting a county each week or pick a monthly topic and let each county respond. Great way to learn about each county. Also, great way to initiate involvement.
- There are many good people that work for NDACo. Many staff are hoping that with the new Executive Director that change for the better will happen.