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## Charlotte Williams: Making county government work

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## Charlotte Williams

# Making county government work.

The morning agenda is a full one. Charlotte Williams is already seated at the chairperson's podium as her 13 fellow members of the Genesee County, Michigan, Board of Commissioners file into the large auditorium. The commissioners, each representing a district of Genesee County government, occupy desks arranged in a sweeping U. The chairperson sits in the center on an elevated podium.

This room, in which municipal business will be transacted, is spacious, tastefully if functionally furnished, and is neither dim nor ancient nor smoke-filled. Behind the commissioners are seats for those who monitor the workings of government. But today's agenda, while full, is non-controversial, so the audience is sparse.

Working with the confidence of one who has chaired many such meetings, Charlotte Williams gets down to work, encouraging discussion on some matters, skillfully moving to discourage it on others. Ninety minutes later, it is all over. Decisions have been reached on funding of the CETA Title I program, on salaries for the personnel of a Headstart program, and on the retention of a \$22,000 work measurement technician who has already saved the county \$175,000.

Charlotte Williams, who is commissioner of the fourth district of Genesee County and chairperson of today's meeting, leans back in the padded speaker's chair, props her ornate eyeglasses atop a bouffant hairdo, and lights another filter tip cigarette.

In her mind, this regular Monday morning commissioner's meeting was a perfect example of county government at work: no parliamentary fireworks, no self-serving speeches introduced on the record for subsequent mailing to constituents, no jockeying for space in tomorrow's newspapers. It was, rather, a group of dedicated professionals entrusted with the responsibility of providing \$75 million of government services to the 450,000 residents of Genesee County, Michigan.

Flint, the largest city in the county, is a company town. It has three Chevrolet plants, a Buick plant, an AC Sparkplug plant, and three Fisher Body plants. When the economy is in full gear, the automotive industry hums, and so does Flint. But when the economy hits a downtick, car sales plummet and a large part of the adult population of Flint is laid off. When this happens, tax collections, on which municipal services are dependent, get choked off and Charlotte Williams' problems begin in earnest.

But on this bright summer morning, cars are being built in record numbers and Charlotte Williams has no crises to contend with. In addition to being a commissioner, she is chairperson of the county's personnel committee and a member of its finance committee. She is also chairperson of the county Board of Health, which is responsible for health services provided to Genesee County. She has been a commissioner since 1965, when the position was appointive. Since 1969, when the office became elective, Mrs. Williams has successfully run for five two-year terms.

"The only promise I make to my constituents," she says,

## **Making county government work**

"is that I will do my best. It's one promise I know I can keep." This year, however, she has a second set of constituents. She has been elected president of the National Association of Counties, a nationwide organization which seeks to expand the role of county government.

Mrs. Williams is leaving now for a meeting of the personnel committee, where some decisions must be reached on seasonal personnel for parks and recreation centers. As chairperson of the committee, Mrs. Williams keeps informed on basic living standards, economic trends, and salaries paid in a variety of different job categories. She has to make recommendations on wage policies, working conditions, and labor negotiations. She has to formulate and recommend personnel regulations, determine the adequacy of county personnel, and approve travel expense claims of the county's 2,200 employees. She is also responsible for the county's Affirmative Action and Manpower programs.

Personnel procedures, however, make up only a small part of Charlotte Williams' responsibilities. As a commissioner, her constant, ongoing responsibility is the disbursement of municipal revenues. "It is," she says, "a case of doing more with less because government just can't handle the things it did before."

County government, Mrs. Williams explains, is now mandated to undertake many new programs and services, among them maintenance of the facilities and personnel of the court system, the prosecuting attorney's office, the sheriff's department, and welfare and relief programs, including all adult hospitalization.

"We are given responsibilities but not the money and resources with which to meet them," she remarks somewhat laconically. "We have to stretch the revenue dollar in ways I never imagined."

During nearly 15 years as a commissioner, Mrs. Williams, a one-time recovery-room nurse whose formal education ended at the high school level, has successfully contended with a series of financial management problems which would tax the abilities of a Harvard MBA. She has developed and implemented systems for program management, cash management, payroll/personnel, property management, the motor pool, and revenue billing. She has consolidated and streamlined county health services, resulting in improved services accompanied by substantial cost savings.

In the allocation of county resources, she has identified budget costs by program area and unit of service and added reliable long-range cost projections, all of which

resulted in better utilization of tax dollars.

She developed a cost allocation plan which led to the recovery of some \$500,000 annually from federal and state grants, and implemented a reimbursement system so that various expenses amounting to \$250,000 annually could be recovered.

In the area of county management practices, Mrs. Williams:

- Developed better personnel policies, resulting in savings of more than \$2 million in labor negotiations, arbitration, and court proceedings.

- Organized work measurement, study, time and systems/procedures reviews which generated savings of about \$300,000.

- Consolidated the county's data processing services. The initial saving of \$30,000 is merely a fraction of the \$1 million annual saving that has been projected.

Back in her office after the personnel committee meeting, Mrs. Williams tackles the mountain of correspondence which has accumulated during a week-long series of meetings in Washington. "This job," she ruminates, "is supposed to be part time, but it takes four hours just to plow through the mail."

In Washington, she met with HUD Secretary Patricia Roberts Harris, Labor Secretary Ray Marshall, HEW Secretary Joseph Califano, Agriculture Secretary Robert Bergland, and Presidential Assistants Stuart E. Eizenstat and Jack Watson, among others. Collectively, she told them that "counties seek a responsible role in determining federal budget priorities and a more equitable sharing of costs."

Charlotte Williams is taking phone calls while she works. "What about Friday?" she responds to one caller. "We won't have a quorum tomorrow!"

Still signing mail, she issues a steady stream of instructions to her secretary: "Reschedule the Board of Health meeting for Thursday morning and make sure the corporation counsel knows about it right away."

The business of Genesee County is being transacted. It is 5 PM, and the large, modern municipal building is emptying rapidly.

For Charlotte Williams, whose day has dissolved in a series of meetings, phone calls, and corridor conferences, there is too much left to do even to think of going home. She whimsically wishes it were Friday, but that is four days away. There is nothing to do, she knows, but to close the door, turn off the phone, and get on with the job of being a part-time county commissioner for the people of Genesee County, Michigan.