

Committees have a bad reputation.

According to common wisdom, committees cannot solve problems because committees themselves are problems. And you can't solve a problem with another problem.



There is some truth to that. Committees can be bureaucratic black holes. Good ideas enter, then disappear. Strong, capable committee members get the life sucked out of them. Individual initiative is thwarted and the best innovations are lost to humankind forever. Quite the horror show.

So yes, in the wrong context, committees can be a ridiculously slow, stupid and silly way to do business.

But I happen to think that committees deserve more appreciation, especially when they are formed to serve the public interest. There are some situations where you don't want just one person calling the shots.

When large amounts of tax money are being spent, or when major decisions about how people live their lives are being made, it needs to be done with deliberation. Committees are a formal public forum in which that deliberation can take place.

But, that said, too many committees can be too much of a good thing.

That is why I take great pleasure in the fact that the committees of Beaufort County Council are about to be restructured. In the recent Council retreat, Chairman Weston Newton proposed reducing the number of county committees to five, and most council members concurred.

Two committees will probably stay the same. They are the good old tried and true ones, Finance and Public Services. Finance deals with income and expenses, including things like bond issues, the school board budget and tourism marketing dollars. Public Services deals with maintaining things like the county's buildings, roads and drainage.

There were also some big shakeups:

Council eliminated the Land Management Committee and created a new Natural Resources Committee. The new committee will deal with land management issues like zoning changes. That's a legally-required function of county government. But the newly constituted committee will focus more on multidisciplinary strategies to preserve the environment and maintain water quality. This is a reflection of the council's commitment to strengthen environmental stewardship.

The Grants and Minority Affairs Committee will be folded into the Community Services Committee.

The Legislative Affairs Committee and the Economic Development Committee will be merged into a new Governmental Affairs Committee. This new committee will also provide oversight on public safety. This might sound surprising. But it makes sense because public safety has become an intergovernmental affair of the first degree. Here's just a quick look at some of the intergovernmental aspects of public safety:

Emergency Management. If we have a big hurricane, all of our emergency operations are staged from neighboring counties like Jasper and Hampton and Allendale. There is even a contingency to move the county seat to another county on a temporary basis.

Justice. All of our prosecution and defense stuff takes place on a regional basis. There is no Beaufort County nothing. It's all State of South Carolina 14th Judicial Circuit. The prosecutors – known in this state as solicitors – come under the South Carolina Commission on Prosecution Coordination. The defense guys come under the South Carolina Commission on Indigent

Defense.

Fire Protection. Yikes. If there is anything we have plenty of in Beaufort County, it is fire districts. We have local fire districts. We have state fire districts. They all have their own commissions and taxes, and intergovernmental agreements with municipalities, and intergovernmental agreements with the other fire districts, and it is pretty much all a big complex intergovernmental beast.

Detention. A lot of our detention center problems are related to some issues in the justice system, which is not a county-level thing, it's a S.C. 14th Judicial Circuit thing. So there is that state-level justice stuff, together with all the S.C. Department of Corrections stuff to deal with. Then there is the Federal stuff. To deal with illegal immigrants who get arrested, we have joined in a federal Homeland Security project, and this will likely result in the need for a regional holding facility that is shared by several counties in South Carolina.

Law Enforcement. On the local level the Sheriff's Department works cooperatively with police and even has contracts to provide services to some municipal areas. Plus the Sheriff's Department has to interface with people in Emergency Management, Justice, Fire, and Detention. So they are also engaged in complex processes that require intergovernmental cooperation at the regional, state and federal level.

So long story short, public safety is very, very intergovernmental.

With all this committee restructuring, it's an exciting time in county government. If this sort of thing gets you excited, that is. And there is reason to hope for our committees. Even though committees as a general concept are much maligned, there are some that get their work done and do it well.

And when committees are on-task and focused on problem-solving, it's a beautiful thing to behold.