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Contact: Dale J. Knapp or Todd A. Berry
(608) 255-4581 or wistax@wistax.org**WISTAX Releases Surprise Findings on County Board Size**
Study Examines County Organization and Relationship to Spending

MADISON—New findings from the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (WISTAX) challenge the conventional wisdom that smaller legislative bodies promote efficient government. In its latest report, “Options for County Organization,” WISTAX found a surprising relationship between the size of a county’s board of supervisors and its spending per capita.

Using sophisticated statistical techniques, WISTAX researchers found that, after accounting for other factors, an increase in county board size of one supervisor was associated with lower spending of \$8 to \$10 per resident. The new report also summarizes important features of county government organization, including board size, administration type and compensation.

“Our staff’s research findings came as a surprise to me,” Todd Berry, WISTAX President, said. “Like many, I expected smaller county boards to be more efficient. But that was not the case,” Berry continued. “The research lends support to the notion that having fewer constituents for each supervisor can help keep spending in check by making each supervisor more accountable.” WISTAX is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to government research and citizen education. It has been serving Wisconsin citizens for more than 70 years.

The findings also bring into question the state’s statutory limits on county board size. Wisconsin statutes specify the maximum number of supervisors a county may have based on county population as determined by the most recent U.S. census. The population ranges and supervisor maximums are:

- under 25,000 - 21 supervisors;
- 25,000 to 49,999 - 31 supervisors;
- 50,000 to 99,999 - 39 supervisors; and
- 100,000 to 499,999 - 47 supervisors.

Menominee county is limited to no more than seven members. State statutes do not place restrictions on board size in Milwaukee county, though single-member districts are required. Milwaukee currently has a full-time 25-member board, but at the urging of the Milwaukee county board and executive, the state legislature recently passed legislation allowing the county to reduce its board size once prior to November 15, 2010. State law generally prohibits counties from changing their board size after July 1 following the decennial census.

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WISTAX found that only 15 of the state's 72 counties were at their statutory maximums in 2003. Smaller counties were more likely to be at their maximums. Thirteen of the 26 counties with the 21-supervisor maximum were at their upper limit. Of the 17 counties in the next population category, only two were at their upper limit. None of the state's larger counties were at their statutory limits.

State statutes also provide for three forms of county administration: elected county executive, appointed county administrator and appointed administrative coordinator. The WISTAX study reported that: 10 Wisconsin counties currently have a county executive; 14 have a county administrator; 18 have a full-time administrative coordinator; and 30 have a part-time administrative coordinator.

There is a modest relationship between county population and type of administration. Of the state's 10 most populous counties, all but Marathon and Rock have county executives. Of the state's smallest ten counties, eight have administrative coordinators (three full-time and five part-time) and two have county administrators.

WISTAX researchers tried to discern spending differences among counties with different types of administration. Academic research suggests presidential forms of government (where the executive is directly responsible to the electorate) tend to spend less per capita than parliamentary governments (where the executive is responsible to the elected assembly). In Wisconsin, the county executive form of government has features of the presidential system, while the administrator/coordinator approach has parliamentary features. However, the data for Wisconsin counties were inconclusive on this issue.

The new study also found that annual salaries for full-time executives, administrators and coordinators varied widely, ranging from \$50,000 for the Ashland county administrator to more than \$114,000 for the St. Croix county administrative coordinator. The median (half higher, half lower) salary for county administrators was highest at \$82,535. The median county executive salary was \$78,122, while the median for a full-time administrative coordinator was \$75,868.

The surprising relationship between county board size and per capita spending suggests questions such as: Are larger state legislatures associated with lower levels of state spending? Do full-time legislatures spend more, or less, than part-time bodies?

For a free copy of *The Wisconsin Taxpayer* titled "Options for County Organization," write the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, 335 W. Wilson St., Madison, WI 53703-3694; e-mail wistax@wistax.org, or visit www.wistax.org. □

(Editors Note: An electronic version of this release is also available at www.wistax.org.)