

Appendix A

Factors Affecting County Expenditures

Factors Affecting County Expenditures

Every county faces a unique situation based upon its demographic composition, location, tax base, and many other factors. The interaction of these elements may affect the expenditures of a given county. The following are some of the factors that may influence the spending patterns of counties.

A. Demographics

Population. Counties with larger populations face certain challenges not encountered by smaller counties. Simply dealing with large amounts of traffic is one challenge that can become very costly, depending upon the burden carried by an area's highways. Large populations may also indicate high population densities, which in turn are associated with higher poverty and crime rates.

Population decline. A large loss of population can have a very significant effect upon a county's per capita spending. The costs of a county's infrastructure and many of its services do not go down immediately when a number of county residents move away. Even if the county's costs remain the same, their per capita spending will increase because the costs are distributed over a smaller population base.

Income. The median per capita income of a county's residents is related to a county's expenditure level in several ways. Per capita income is indirectly related to a county's ability to raise revenues. Where incomes are lower, property values may also be depressed, reducing a county's tax capacity. Poverty rates, in turn, will be higher creating greater demand for public services.

B. Geographic location

Different areas of the state often operate within quite different economic environments. Just the presence of one large business or industry can make quite a difference for an entire region.

Several regions of Minnesota have had greater economic difficulties than the rest of the state. Declines in industries or companies that dominate local economies may result in a higher level of need for public assistance. The current crises in farming may result in lower property values and a decline in revenues for counties whose economies are primarily agriculturally-based. Counties located in these areas may have more difficulty raising revenues, and also may face higher demands for public services.

C. Revenue sources

Tax Capacity Per Capita. The amount of money any individual or entity spends is directly related to the amount that is available to spend. Likewise, the costs of doing business are directly related to the amounts of revenue that can be generated to meet the costs. The greater the amount and types of revenue available to a county, the more it will spend. The more it costs to provide services in a county, the more funds the county will need to raise.

Enterprise Funds. This report does not reflect expenditures accounted for in enterprise funds. The most common enterprise funds are for sanitation, hospitals, nursing homes, and nursing services. Several counties operate arenas, convention centers and other entertainment facilities and report their financial activities in enterprise funds. Counties that offer these services and account for them in

the General Fund or Special Revenue Funds will show higher per capita expenditures in this report than those that provide the services through enterprise funds.

D. Shared services, joint powers agreements

A significant practice among counties is the sharing of services and the use of joint powers agreements to provide necessary services. "Joint exercise of powers" is defined in Minnesota Statutes § 471.59. Such arrangements allow counties to provide services jointly with other counties and thus pool their resources.

Shared service arrangements are not necessarily formal; some counties provide services to other jurisdictions on an informal basis. The importance of shared services and joint powers agreements on this per capita analysis of county expenditures has to do primarily with the population number used to determine the per capita rates.

The Office of the State Auditor does not collect information on joint powers agreements such that it would enable us to divide every expenditure by a different population figure. It is imperative, therefore, that in those instances where one county's expenditures appear higher than the average, the reader exercise caution in interpreting the numbers and investigate further into the possible sharing of services and/or the use of joint powers.

E. Proximity to county, regional, or state-run programs/facilities

If your neighbor has a pool and they are willing to let you use it, you probably won't install one of your own. Counties are subject to the same effect of proximity. Similarly, counties located close to a regional or state park may opt not to develop or expand their own park program.

The degree of isolation experienced by a community, whether geographic or technological (e.g., lack of advanced telecommunications capability), can also affect service needs and costs. Counties that are remote from other communities may not have the opportunity to participate in joint powers arrangements or have access to urban amenities, and thus may need to provide a wider range of services out of their own budgets.

F. Source of labor

The extent to which a county depends upon other than full-time, salaried employees will affect the levels of expenditures. The following types of arrangements can reduce the full-time complement of staff: extensive use of part-time employees; significant reliance on volunteers; and use of contracts for specific projects or for general services. Besides lower wages to part-time employees, an important reduction created through these types of arrangements is in the area of fringe benefits, which are not generally paid either to part-time employees, volunteers, or individuals hired on a contract basis.

Some employee arrangements may increase, rather than reduce costs. Some counties' expenditures are affected by the extensive unionization of their work force. Because of the role of the unions, salary costs may be more difficult for these counties to control.

G. Other factors

The effects of weather and natural disasters can significantly affect the expenditures for certain services over a period of time. Counties affected by natural disasters, such as floods, may have higher public safety, streets and highways, and infrastructure costs for a year or two. During winters in which there is an unusually high snow fall, counties may have increased expenditures for snow removal.

There are many other incidental factors not included in this list. Explanations of differences in county expenditures should be pursued with county officials to better understand each county's per capita expenditures.