

A Public Health Financing Plan Proposal

Public Health Today

Struggle between public health and politics is a part of American history. Public health relies on expert knowledge derived from such areas as epidemiology, biostatistics, and informed community concern to identify and deal with the health needs of whole populations. Central tenets to decision making are a professional ethic and commitment to use such knowledge to fulfill the public interest in reducing human suffering and enhancing the quality of life.

The dynamics of politics, however, make it difficult to fulfill this commitment. Crises, hot issues, and the concerns of organized interest groups often drive decisions. Decisions are made largely on the basis of competition, bargaining, and influence rather than comprehensive analysis. The idea that politics can be restricted to the legislative arena while the work of public agencies remains neutral and expert is not credible, and public health has had great difficulty accommodating itself to these political dynamics. Along with this, public health has an identity crisis. The man on the street has an apparent lack of understanding as to just what Public Health is — what it does, and for whom.

The Public Health system is a *public service* (read *funded by the public to serve the public*), and it is in the *prevention* business, society's most cost-effective approach to protecting everyone's health. The great epidemics of the past were reined in by public health measures, and our sanitation and immunization programs have been largely responsible for a relatively disease-free America, lengthening our life span from the mid-40's in 1900 to the mid-70's today. The local financing of our health department must be improved if these advances are to be continued. This can be *and should be* accomplished by embarking upon course to achieve this goal, beginning with a commitment to a consistent funding process.

Dedicated and predictable financing would facilitate the following good management practices:

1. Permit the development of long-range health improvement plans specific to identified needs
2. Improve resources to attract and retain talented staff personnel
3. Facilitate establishing dependable, solidly based multi-year programs

Recommendation:

To address public health funding needs, *a dedicated millage assessment would equitably provide the reliable funding source needed for efficient and effective long-term operation of Public Health.* Adoption of this funding process would serve a three-fold purpose:

First, it would stabilize the ever escalating cost of permits and fees, more evenly spreading the burden of providing public health services among the tax-paying general public, who are truly public health's greatest beneficiaries. Relief from these now unevenly placed burdens upon our business folks, builders, and homeowners – who presently shoulder this burden alone – is not only just, **it is the fair thing to do.**

Secondly, it would clearly establish the local government's funding source for and commitment to providing its "share" of support in combination with that of federal and state funding for public health. This financing process would obviate the annual budget crisis precipitated by not having a long-range plan to address the Local Board's fiduciary responsibility to adequately fund public health.

Thirdly, being mindful that 'public health' is a **service**, *not a revenue generating activity*, per se, such funding would greatly alleviate dependence upon conducting grant-only programs that are specific to identified needs of our less fortunate neighbors. That health department funding should come from local sources is indeed most appropriate — this is our county... these are our people... it is **our** responsibility.