

Taxes, ethics and cooperation: Dunstan and Prenzler square off over county chair

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EDWARDSVILLE - Voters in **Madison County** must choose between current **Madison County Chairperson Alan Dunstan (D)** and current **Madison County Treasurer Kurt Prenzler (R)** for the leadership of the entire county.

Up until 12 years ago, the position of **Madison County Board Chairperson** was chosen by the county board. When Dunstan was elected as chairperson 14 years ago by

the board, one of his first reforms was placing the position of Madison County Board Chairperson on a public ballot, instead of placing such an important position in the exclusive hands of county board members.

"I think that has been a good reform," Dunstan said. "Before then, people did not get to vote for the main person on the county board. It's a better process to be elected by the people."

Another bid for public transparency championed by Dunstan was moving the time of county board meetings. Dunstan said meeting times once took place every third Wednesday morning at 9:30 a.m. Under his administration, those meeting times were moved to 5 p.m. every third Wednesday.

"This is to make sure people could attend meetings without having to take time off work," he said.

Prenzler also considers transparency essential to any form of government.

"Ethics and controlling expenses are concepts sometimes neglected inside government," he said in a statement. "Transparency is also important in government, because the taxpayers should be regarded as the 'owners.'"

He also challenged Dunstan's ethics and transparency in the statement.

"Ten years ago, the chairman knew about unethical tax sales, but he didn't say or do anything to stop it," he said. "Because the county did nothing, the FBI investigated and the former treasurer was sent to federal prison for bid rigging."

Taxes are paramount to Prenzler. Prenzler is one of the main supporters on a ballot initiative to lower Madison County's maximum tax levy from 2.5 percent to two percent. He gathered 1,150 signatures from voters across the county to bring it to a ballot.

"The budget is padded with \$3-4 million for an intentional surplus," he said. "If I am elected, I will reduce taxes by \$3-4 million."

One of Prenzler's main tenants of his campaign is lowering Madison County's tax levy by as much as 10 percent.

"My plan is to reduce the county tax levy by a least 10 percent without reducing services," Prenzler said in a statement. "How can this be done? Easy, the county has been padding its annual budget for years by levying more than it needs - taking money unnecessarily out of the taxpayers' pockets."

Dunstan contests the county's current 2.5 percent taxing levy may prove to be essential if another event like the **Great Recession of 2008** occurs again. He said the county is only eight percent of a Madison County resident's property taxes. Other taxing bodies such as schools, fire stations, libraries and townships compose most of that bill. If the levy is passed, Dunstan said most taxpayers in Madison County will not see a major difference.

"We're not currently taxing at the maximum currently, which is 2.5 percent," he said. "We raised it to the maximum in 2008, while lowering other taxes."

He accused Prenzler of misleading people about their possible savings. Dunstan said Prenzler told voters the ballot measure being passed would save them as much as 10-20 percent on their property tax bill. Prenzler told Riverbender.com the county's portion of property taxes was less than 10 percent and said he would like to lower the levy to cease the current budget padding.

Despite his worries passing the measure to lower the levy could lead to more layoffs if another financial crisis occurs, Dunstan believes the measure will pass.

"Odds are it will pass, because when people see a reduction, they will pass that," Dunstan said. "I'm a realistic person, and I know people will vote for it to lower taxes."

During the Great Recession of 2008, Dunstan said as many as 325 Madison County employees were terminated. He said he was not proud of that number, but insisted he did all he could to ensure Madison County stayed afloat during that crisis. Since that time, Dunstan said the county has nearly reached a pre-2008 budget status and is currently operating debt-free on a balanced budget.

In fact, since Prenzler took the office of Madison County Treasurer in 2010, his tax bill has increased, Dunstan said. The county's portion of it, however, has decreased.

"When Prenzler became treasurer in 2010, his taxes on his house have gone up," Dunstan said. "The portion going to the county has gone down. The county has already made quite a bit of cuts, but he doesn't mention that."

Dunstan gives credit to the county's financial success to the 19 Democrats and 10 Republicans serving together on the Madison County Board.

"It was never me operating on my own, it was Democrats and Republicans working together," he said. "I give credit to having a board of both parties. It's why we're in the standing today that we are in."

That coalition of two parties has accomplished a lot in Madison County, Dunstan said. Besides the financial crisis, 2008 brought another crisis - **FEMA** was threatening to remove its certification from the levees of Madison, **St. Clair** and **Monroe** counties.

"This was a textbook case of governments working together to solve the problem," he said. "It did not just hit Madison County, it hit everyone."

If FEMA had removed certification from the levees, the decision would have affected as many as 150,000 people, 50,000 jobs and 5,000 businesses, Dunstan said. To repair them, the counties and cities affected worked with the Army Corps of Engineers. Dunstan said the levees should be prepared for another 100-year flood by spring 2017.

Without those repairs, Dunstan said residents and businesses in the shadow of the formerly-crumbling levees would have been forced to pay flood insurance at high premiums, as if the levees did not even exist.

Dunstan's insistence on using local labor, however, may have cost Madison County taxpayers. Dunstan and the **Army Corps of Engineers** worked to develop project labor agreements to ensure the work was done locally, instead of taking federal bids, which may have resulted in cheaper labor. Dunstan still defends that decision.

"We tried to use local labor with project labor agreements," he said. "The residents are safer now than they ever have been. It was our citizens being protected, so we wanted to use local labor instead of bringing people from somewhere like Tennessee."

Better bidding practices are among Prenzler's campaign tenants. One of his promises if he is elected is "using online software to open up bidding to more vendors, as is done in other counties." He said better bidding practices will save taxpayers money.

In a statement, Prenzler also promised to provide online notification when positions on boards and commissions become available, appointing an ethics advisor - a position Prenzler said Dunstan has not filled in the past year - and to drive his personal vehicle, instead of a county car, while submitting receipts for purchases, instead of using a county-issued credit cards.

As Madison County Treasurer, Prenzler said he has reduced his office's budget by 30 percent, automated tax sales, tripled investment deposits in local banks from \$30-90 million and stopped no-bid county investments with a bond salesman from Little Rock, Arkansas.