Johnson County forms Department of Health & Environment

JOHNSON COUNTY, KANSAS (March 1, 2012) — Johnson County has approved its second department merger in a month.

The latest consolidation involved the Department of Health and the Environmental Department to form the new Department of Health and Environment. On Thursday, March 1, the Johnson County Board of Commissioners authorized the merger by a 5-1 vote with First District Commissioner Edward Peterson dissenting. Commissioner Calvin Hayden was absent from the meeting.

The proposal attracted scores of citizens to the Board’s hearing room, filling it to near capacity. The Board heard comments from 14 audience members. All spoke against the consolidation and keeping the Environmental Department a separate department of County Government.

“From a management perspective side of the fence, the consolidation makes a lot of organizational sense because of the synergies, efficiencies, potential for shared resources, strong leadership, and positive external relationships with stakeholders in both departments,” County Manager Hannes Zacharias said. “It’s a tough cost-savings decision, but it’s a good fit without devaluing the great importance of providing environmental services.”

Over the past few months in addressing projected budget shortfalls, a restructuring of the Environmental Department and elimination of vacant positions generated overall estimated savings at $511,384 to $556,007.

The merger will result in the reduction of a department director position created because of a recent retirement and elimination of a department. Additionally savings from the consolidation were estimated at between $86,000 to $134,000.

Unlike two other department mergers since last fall, this consolidation, initially, wasn’t recommended in a final report released in February 2011 by the Matrix Consulting Group. The report involved an
organizational structure assessment and an optimization study to assist the County in evaluating the overall efficiency and effectiveness of county operations.

The report listed several changes in the restructuring and streamlining of county operations, but recommended that the 30-year-old Environmental Department remain “as a standalone entity.” That recommendation was supported in an initial review by the county until a supplemental review was requested by the county manager.

The second look was ordered after the retirement of key positions in the Environmental Department in late 2011 and early 2012 and the pending elimination of its Food Safety Program. The Kansas Department of Agriculture will assume food safety inspections in Johnson County on April 1.

The supplemental recommendation was to merge the two departments.

With Thursday’s approval by the Board, the organizational change becomes effective Monday, March 4. Lougene Marsh, the county’s health director, will direct the Department of Health and Environment. A deputy director to oversee environmental functions of the department will be named in the future.

As part of the consolidation, the Water Quality Lab and Pretreatment responsibilities, including the Fats, Oils, and Grease (FOG) program of the Environmental Department will be transferred to the county’s Wastewater Department.

Six Department of Health and Environment employee positions affected by termination of the food safety contact will be interviewed and offered new County Government duties for which they qualify. Four positions in the FOG program will be transferred to the Wastewater Department.

The environmental functions of the Department of Health and Environment will remain in the county’s Sunset Drive Office Building, 11811 South Sunset Drive, Olathe, while the health functions and clinic services will continue at the nearby Health Services Building, 11875 South Sunset Drive.

The Environmental Department has been both an independent entity and a part of another department in the past. The county formed an Environmental Division within the Wastewater Department in the late 1970s, involving research work in water quality. In 1981, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment delegated environmental responsibilities to the county. With the new regulatory role, the Environmental Department was created in February 1982. It was the first county environmental department established in the state of Kansas.

Johnson County has had a Health Department since 1943.

The creation of a new department by consolidation of two existing departments comes on the heels of the merger on February 2 of the departments of Information Technology Services (ITS) and Automated Information Mapping Systems (AIMS) and the Oracle Support Center Division of the County Manager’s Office into the new Department of Technology and Innovation.

The changes in County Government were allowed as a result of voter approval of the county’s Home Rule Charter in 2000. The charter provided that the County Manager may recommend and initiate
changes in the administrative organization of County Government to the Board of County Commissioners for consideration and final approval.

The Matrix Report listed 34 recommendations for improving organizational structures to capture efficiencies, align similar functions, reduce redundancies, and achieve synergies not currently in place. Approximately a third of the recommendations have been implemented by the county since release of the report a year ago.

Johnson County Government now has 34 departments, a reduction of three departments since the Matrix Report and six fewer departments since approval of the Home Rule Charter.

More information is available by contacting County Manager Hannes Zacharias at (913) 715-0731 or hannes.zacharias@jocogov.org or Lougene Marsh, director of the new Johnson County Department of Health and Environment, at (913) 477-8300 or lougene.marsh@jocogov.org.

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**About Johnson County**
Nestled in the southwestern quadrant of the Kansas City Metropolitan Region, Johnson County, Kansas is a community of choice with a current population of more than 544,000, making it the most populated of the 105 counties in Kansas, but traditionally having the lowest mill levy in the state. Johnson County offers a vibrant quality of life including nationally recognized schools, libraries, and parks where businesses and families choose to locate and call their home.

Johnson County Government provides daily services, ranging from aging to zoning, through 34 departments and five agencies. For more information visit the county’s website at [www.jocogov.org](http://www.jocogov.org).