

CO-OP VIEWS

News and information for the benefit of Iowa cooperatives.

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WHERE BOARDS WORK BEST

Reflections on Cooperative Governance with Bobby Martens, Executive Director

Over the past few years, I've had the opportunity to spend considerable time with cooperative boards and leadership teams. These interactions provide a picture of how the governance environment for cooperatives is working and evolving.

What stands out is not a lack of commitment or competence. No doubt, directors are intelligent folks who care deeply about their communities and cooperatives! But governance today is more complex than it used to be, and expectations aren't always well defined. That gap shows up in a few consistent ways

Lack of Clarity Is a Governance Risk

One of the most common challenges is role clarity, or lack of it. Boards know they're there to govern, not manage. However, issues such as enterprise risk, capital deployment, and workforce challenges are increasingly blurring lines.

Directors feel accountable for outcomes, which is fair. But stepping too far into operations creates its own set of problems. The strongest boards don't pretend this tension doesn't exist—they revisit it often and keep each other in check. Providing oversight and setting strategic direction are in most ways quite different than managing and operating their farms—a reality that boards and management can easily forget.

You see it most during routine updates. When conversations include vendors, staffing difficulties, or performance concerns, individual directors feel compelled—with great intentions—to dive into the details and offer operational solutions. The issue isn't that directors want to help, it's that boardroom time gets pulled into operational weeds, and sometimes those conversations don't stay in the room.

Too Much Information, Not Enough Clarity

Another common issue is the volume of information presented to boards. Materials are detailed, operational discussions are often long, and meeting packets continue to grow. In the worst cases, board meetings become long and tedious. In these environments, directors frequently struggle to determine what truly requires board attention.

This usually isn't a data problem—it's a clarity problem. High-functioning boards focus less on reviewing everything and more on interpreting what matters. When there's a clear strategy in place, information becomes a tool not a distraction.

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Good policy helps here too. Policies that define what belongs at the board level—and what does not—help focus discussions on governance responsibilities. This structure allows boards to operate as a decision making body rather than drifting into operational review, which can dilute both board effectiveness and management accountability.

Risk Has Moved to the Forefront of Governance

Risk oversight has moved front and center. Directors are expected to understand enterprise-level risks without getting buried in technical detail—and that's a tough balance.

Boards that clearly define risk oversight through board policies tend to approach this responsibility with greater confidence and consistency. In a few cases, I witnessed how management supports this clarity by providing risk dashboards or key indicators that allow the board to monitor trends without becoming involved in daily activities.

Capital Decisions & Long Term Member-Value

Capital decisions are particularly challenging in the current environment of elevated price levels, higher interest rates, and compressed local savings. Boards are weighing reinvestment against returns

to the cooperative and to members, assessing debt tolerance amid uncertainty, and evaluating growth opportunities alongside service needs.

These discussions often extend beyond financial analysis into questions of cooperative purpose and long term member-value, including how to balance the needs of current members with those of future members and the concept of the “future farmer”. In all this, cash patronage and member equity is directly tied to member value. Capital policies—formal or informal—help provide continuity and consistency in decision making, even as individual directors change over time.

New Directors, New Expectations

Board turnover is becoming more common as a wave of experienced directors retire and new, often much younger, directors are elected. While new directors bring valuable perspectives (and a breath of fresh air!), many are surprised by the fiduciary responsibility, the complexity of oversight, and the shift from individual experience to board-level thinking.

Boards that invest in onboarding and ongoing education close that gap faster. Those that use bylaws and board policies as active governance tools—rather than reference documents rarely used—help new directors understand

how to contribute effectively as part of a governing body, instead of as independent actors.

A More Intentional Approach

Taken together, I believe effective cooperative governance requires greater intentionality than ever before. Strong boards are not those that avoid tension, but those that engage it deliberately, transparently, and with a long term view.

Clear board policies, disciplined governance practices, and a shared understanding that boards act collectively—not individually—are essential to governing well in a changing environment. Gone are the days of boards meeting monthly to solve operational problems, but here are the days of boards meeting monthly to provide oversight and align strategy.

A Few Things Worth Reconsidering

To strengthen governance, boards should consider the following:

- Revisit board–management role clarity through bylaws and board policies
- Reinforce that directors act as a board, not as individuals
- Ensure board materials highlight key issues and implications, not just details
- Define a limited set of enterprise risks for board level focus

- Explicitly discuss capital allocation trade-offs in terms of member impact and long term positioning
- Invest in new director onboarding and continuing director education
- Protect agenda time for forward looking discussion

These practices do not guarantee success, but they strengthen a board's ability to govern thoughtfully, consistently, and confidently over time.

Boards Act as a Body, Not as Individuals

Strong governance depends on a shared understanding that boards govern as a body, not as individual directors. Clear board policies, bylaws, and role definitions guide behavior in these moments. When directors act outside of board authority or as individuals, governance clarity erodes and management effectiveness is weakened. Directors do not direct staff, evaluate individual employees, or make commitments on behalf of the cooperative without board approval.

Clear policies translate this principle into practice by defining roles, decision authority, and boundaries. Acting collectively protects directors, supports management effectiveness, and reduces governance risk—ensuring that leadership remains aligned and accountable over the long term.





A DAY IN THE LIFE

With Megan Carlson, Director of Government Affairs

No two days at the Capitol are ever the same—but that’s part of what makes this role so rewarding. My day usually starts early, before legislators gavel in. Mornings are spent reviewing committee and debate agendas, tracking new bill amendments published overnight, and reviewing in on the status of bills affecting Iowa’s cooperatives.

Once I arrive under the Golden Dome, much of my time is spent moving from committee rooms to the rotunda, meeting with legislators and staff to discuss how proposed legislation impacts IIC members. Lobbying often involves a lot of hurry up and wait.

However, sometimes it is a single conversation that can influence a bill for the rest of the session. As the session progresses, the number of bills that are likely to progress begins to dwindle, and much of the lobby’s time is spent waiting

for caucuses and floor debate.

Just as important as working with legislators is working alongside other members of the lobby. Rarely does legislation move forward without collaboration, compromise, and problem-solving among stakeholders who may not always start in the same place. Many issues are resolved not in formal meetings, but through hallway conversations and late-day discussions focused on finding common ground. Building trust and maintaining open lines of communication across the lobby helps identify workable solutions, prevent unintended consequences, and ultimately move legislation forward. Those relationships are often key to turning challenges into compromises and getting bills across the finish line.

In between meetings, there’s plenty happening behind the scenes. I’m

coordinating with coalition partners, monitoring floor debate, drafting updates for members, and adjusting strategy when amendments shift the direction of a bill. A quiet afternoon can quickly turn into a late evening if an amendment is suddenly filed on a bill scheduled for debate or negotiations stretch longer than expected, especially as session deadlines approach.

At its core, my role as the IIC lobbyist is about relationships and representation. It’s making sure legislators understand how the decisions they make at the Capitol impact cooperatives, farmers, and rural communities back home in the districts they represent.

The days are often long and unpredictable, but every conversation helps ensure IIC’s priorities are understood and represented where it matters most.

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS & STRATEGIC CHANGE ACROSS IOWA CO-OPS

Across Iowa, cooperative boards have been focused on one of their most important responsibilities: ensuring strong leadership is in place to guide their organizations forward. Recent months have brought a number of leadership transitions, reflecting both long-planned retirements and strategic shifts within the cooperative system.

These moments matter. Leadership changes are more than personnel updates. They signal continuity, growth, and the board's commitment to positioning their co-op for long-term success. The following highlights provide a snapshot of recent transitions across Iowa cooperatives.

Farmers Union Cooperative (Ossian) & Premier Cooperative (WI)

Matt Severson, CEO – Pending Merger

Members of Farmers Union Cooperative in Ossian voted to merge with Premier Cooperative in Wisconsin. The merger vote passed with nearly 87% in favor and strong voter participation, signaling clear member support for the combined future.

Matt Severson, CEO of Premier Cooperative, will lead the merged organization. Integration efforts are already underway, with teams focused on aligning operations, systems and services ahead of the planned August 1 merger date.

Five Star Cooperative - Tony Myers, CEO

Tony Myers has stepped into the CEO role at Five Star Cooperative following the retirement of longtime leader Scott Black. Five Star Cooperative operates 19 locations across 15 counties in North Iowa and Southern Minnesota.

Farmers Coop Elevator Co. (Radcliffe) - Mikel Curtis, General Manager

Mikel Curtis has been named General Manager of Farmers Coop Elevator Co. in Radcliffe. Curtis steps into the role as the cooperative continues supporting local producers in the Radcliffe area.

Key Cooperative (Roland) - Brent Deppe, CEO

Following the retirement of Boyd Brodie, Brent Deppe was chosen to serve as CEO of Key Cooperative. Deppe brings extensive experience within the organization as Key Cooperative continues serving members and communities through its agronomy, grain, energy, and feed divisions.

Farmers Cooperative Elevator Company (FAC - Arcadia Cooperative) - Nate Fara, CEO

Nate Fara has assumed the role of CEO at Arcadia Cooperative, after the retirement of Darrell Henkenius. FAC has locations in Arcadia, Westside and Schleswig, plus an agronomy hub in Kiron.

PRO Cooperative - Dan Forey, Interim CEO

PRO Cooperative is currently operating under interim leadership of Dan Forey. PRO Cooperative serves 12 locations in Northwest Central Iowa.

DATES TO KEEP

2026 IIC ANNUAL MEETING

NEW TIMING. SAME IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS.

The Iowa Institute for Cooperatives Annual Meeting is moving to a new time of year. Mark your calendars now for August 26–27 as cooperative leaders from across the state gather in Ankeny for two days of networking, discussion, and leadership development.

This year's event will feature member-focused conversations, updates impacting Iowa cooperatives, and a keynote presentation from Mike Hourigan on navigating change and leadership challenges.

Registration is now open:

Wednesday only: \$150
(Annual Meeting)

Both days: \$400
(Annual Meeting + Director/Manager Workshop)

The optional Director/Manager Workshop on Thursday is designed specifically for cooperative board members and general managers.

Advance registration is encouraged. Additional program details will be announced as finalized.

AUGUST 26–27, 2026

FFA ENRICHMENT CENTER - ANKENY



Hall of Fame Nominations Open

Nominations are now being accepted for the Iowa Cooperative Hall of Fame, recognizing individuals who have made lasting contributions to Iowa's cooperative system through leadership and service. **Nominations are due June 5.**

[Click here for more information about the Hall of Fame Nominations.](#)

CO-OP INTERN DAY

JUNE 2, 2026 | 9:00 A.M. – 3:30 P.M.
COBBLESTONE INN & SUITES - BOONE

Co-op Intern Day brings interns together for a one-day experience focused on cooperative education, professional development, and industry connections. IIC **scholarship applications** are also now open, submissions due Oct 9.

Registration:

\$175 per intern for groups of one to four

\$150 per intern for groups of five or more from the same co-op

Registration deadline is May 22, 2026.

NEXTGEN 2026–27

JULY 27–28, 2026
DECEMBER 9–10, 2026
MARCH 1–2, 2027

CROSSROADS PAVILION EVENT CENTER - SHELDON

The NextGen Managers Program develops emerging cooperative leaders through hands-on learning, strategic thinking, communication, and collaboration.

Registration:

Early rate through May 31: \$3,250

Standard rate after May 31: \$3,500

Registration closes June 30, 2026.

HUMAN RESOURCES CONFERENCE

SEPTEMBER 9–10, 2026

Save the date for the 2026 IIC Human Resources Conference. Additional details will be announced in the coming months.

IT INNOVATION SUMMIT

NOVEMBER 17–18, 2026

Mark your calendars for the 2026 IT Innovation Summit. Additional details, including location, agenda, and registration information, will be announced as plans are finalized.



Iowa Institute
for Cooperatives

IIC Staff

Bobby Martens, Executive Director

Matthew Eddy, Director of Cooperative Education

Megan Carlson, Director of Government Affairs

Sofia Ingersoll, Business Manager

Mike St. Clair, Lobbyist

Contact Us

Iowa Institute for Cooperatives
2515 University Blvd., Suite 104
Ames, Iowa 50010

P: 515-292-2667

E: info@iowainstitute.coop

W: www.iowainstitute.coop

