



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Who's keeping track of Cook County vehicles?

Not the County itself, according to a letter received by the BGA

CHICAGO – A Better Government Association (“BGA”) investigation, in partnership with Fox-Chicago, shows Cook County has failed to live up to its own laws for tracking and managing its large fleet of vehicles. The bills for those vehicles, their maintenance, and their expensive gasoline are paid by Cook County taxpayers, already struggling to fill their own gas tanks.

On April 18, the BGA sent a Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”) request to Cook County for records related to the Vehicle Steering Committee (“VSC”) – a panel created in 2005 to keep tabs on the county’s fleet and work toward reducing emissions. The **Cook County Ordinance** gives the VSC responsibility for overseeing county vehicle use, requiring department-heads and countywide elected officials to maintain and regularly submit reports related to the cars, their condition, and who has access to them.

Two months after the BGA sent its request, Cook County finally responded by providing sparse, out of date records, and a letter admitting that the County had not been living up to its self imposed requirements in regard to the Committee since at least 2005.

The BGA asked for numerous documents the County is to maintain, under the ordinance. The County admitted in its response that some of the required lists and reports had not been written or compiled for quite some time. The office of Cook County President Todd Stroger did provide some informal records for purposes of providing information, although they are not those required by County ordinance.

Among the records requested by the BGA was a Vehicle Inventory Report. The County did provide a list of vehicles under the control of the County Board President and the Bureau of Health. However, the list did not contain all the information that the County itself demands in its own ordinance. Furthermore, no inventory for vehicles under the control of other elected officials exists.

The BGA asked for accident logs, and the County fully complied with this request.

Prior to awarding Cook County the dubious distinction of having the highest sales tax in the country, President Todd Stroger repeatedly argued that there was “no fat to cut” in the County’s budget and thus a sales tax hike was necessary.

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Any competent manager will tell you that one of the critical aspects of running a successful business is having a firm handle on inventory and assets. Without accurate and current information in those two areas, it is virtually impossible to efficiently run any type of institution. Further, while gasoline prices have continued breaking records, limiting consumption has been a number one priority for most organizations – public and private.

Apparently such common sense is absent in Cook County. Although efficient management of the fleet would not, in and of itself, solve the County's endless appetite for more tax revenue, the County has a duty to squeeze every last penny out of its operations before asking beleaguered taxpayers for a bailout. The County has failed in this duty.

Nevertheless, the BGA commends the County for its frank admissions of deficiencies in its record-keeping, relating to vehicle use - particularly as Illinois taxpayers are unaccustomed to elected officials and units of government admitting when they have made a mistake. The response from President Stroger's office tries to shift some of the blame to former CFO Tom Glaser and other elected officials, but does admit its own shortcomings. Such candor is refreshing simply because it is so rare.

Moving forward, the BGA recommends that taxpayers hold onto their wallets tightly then next time President Stroger argues that tax hikes are inevitable because there is no fat to cut. If the County's management of the fleet is any indication, the County could stand to lose a few pounds.

More information on this investigation is available at:
http://www.bettergov.org/investigations_countyvehicles.html

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This investigation was conducted jointly by the Better Government Association and Fox-Chicago News. Research conducted by BGA Chief Investigator Dan Sprehe, Executive Director Jay Stewart, and staff members, including Lindsay Lewis, Derek Bagley, and Matthew Hays.