



Gearing Up For 2014's Policy Action

Description

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As another legislative season ramps up, the Better Government Association is setting its sights on reforming an area of waste and inefficiency where Illinois has no equal: bloated government.

This year, a major BGA priority is helping to advance "Smart Streamlining" of government throughout the state. What is "Smart Streamlining"? The BGA sees it as merging, reducing and ending excess units of government in order to provide better, faster, open and more responsive service to the public.

There are plenty of consolidation candidates: Illinois has nearly 7,000 separate government entities—far more than any other state. And that doesn't include an innumerable number of overlapping agencies, departments and political offices.

Throughout 2014, the BGA policy team will work to achieve needed change. Obviously this is a vast task that will not be accomplished in a year, or perhaps in many years, but now is the time to seriously rally government lawmakers to cut costs, improve efficiency and be more receptive to the public by blending and eradicating overlapping jurisdictions, unnecessary political offices and superfluous agencies and functions.

Here are some areas the BGA will be following:

- **School Districts.** School district consolidation is complex and can be troublesome



if not done correctly. However, given that Illinois has nearly 900 school districts and outpaces other states of similar size, it is fiscally and socially prudent for the state and individual districts to examine the possible cost savings that mergers could provide. In 2011, the state legislature created a commission to study school consolidation. In July 2012, the Classrooms First Commission issued a report with 23 recommendations (including some legislative action). State lawmakers acted upon some of those recommendations last year, easing the path to reorganization for smaller school districts.



However, more needs to be done. There are more than 200 school districts with just a single school. Most of the one-school districts are downstate, but 30 of them are in suburban Cook County where school districts have too often become dens of patronage hiring and mired in school-board politics. The goal is to reduce redundant and often excessive administrative costs and refocus the consolidation schools on enhancing educational programming and student enrichment efforts.

- **Townships.** Some argue that Illinois’s 1,400 townships are still necessary, particularly in rural parts of the state. It’s a tough sell especially when trying to justify their existence and expense in heavily populated areas where county and municipal governments can often perform many of the duties townships provide. In addition, there are 17 counties in Illinois without townships—evidence that life can go on without these government relics that may have outlived their times.

In 2012, by a 2-to-1 margin, voters in Evanston approved an advisory referendum to dissolve Evanston Township into city government. Now, they can actually make it happen thanks to the state legislature’s approval last year of a bill backed by the BGA that gives Evanston voters the opportunity to place a binding resolution on the ballot. However, similar measures should be considered for 19 other townships that, like Evanston Township, have identical boundaries with municipal governments. They include four townships in Cook County (Berwyn, Cicero, Oak Park and River Forest) and several other more densely populated downstate townships (Bloomington; Capital, which shares boundaries with the City of Springfield; Champaign; East St. Louis; Galesburg; Macomb; Peoria; and Quincy).

- **Special units**—These are the government units handling specialized services like drainage, fire protection, library, mosquito abatement, park and sanitary districts. In some cases, these districts may duplicate duties handled by other entities. In other cases, these districts may provide services in close proximity to others doing the same jobs. Last year, the state legislature approved a bill granting DuPage County the ability to merge or eliminate as many as 13 special districts. Similar measures might be necessary for other counties to do the same. But the legislature must be more proactive. Another measure that would have merged suburban Cook County’s four mosquito abatement districts into a division of county government stalled in committee. And the Illinois Local Government Consolidation Commission has yet to report back to the General Assembly after more than two years of existence. Its final report was initially due at the end of 2012. Last year, the legislature extended the due date to Sep. 30, 2013. This is the

legislature's second attempt at a consolidation commission. The first one, created back in 2005, never yielded any meaningful reforms.

- **Political offices.** One of the clearest examples is the long-considered proposal in Cook County to merge some or all aspects of the offices of the assessor, auditor, clerk, recorder of deeds and treasurer. Those offices handle varying aspects of property tax administration. Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle has said that she might lobby for state legislation that would make it possible to create a property tax administrator office. The idea has been considered for nearly a decade with little to no movement out of Springfield. Smaller counties in Illinois should pay close attention since these mergers might be easier for them to accomplish.

While smart streamlining is a major emphasis this year, the BGA continues efforts to advance other measures that are core to its mission of fighting government corruption by making greater openness, transparency, accountability and efficiency an integral part of the governing process.

Those initiatives include:

- **Revamped statements of economic interest.** These documents, submitted by elected officials and high-ranking government workers, are designed to reveal potential conflicts of interest. However, the current statements reveal little, if any, information with many officials answering "not applicable" to all the form's questions. Legislation has been proposed to beef up the form, provide for uniform language statewide and require that the information be filed electronically but it is languishing in committee.
- **Freedom of Information Act Protection.** Some state lawmakers are considering an omnibus bill that includes a number of possible changes for the Illinois FOIA. Should any of the proposed changes weaken the law, the BGA is prepared to oppose such measures while also bolstering efforts to strengthen FOIA.
- **Closing pension loopholes.** While the state legislature has taken a step toward remedying Illinois' massive unfunded pension liability and ending some questionable provisions that boost pension payouts, there's still work to be done.

It's important to note..

Spurred, in part, by a BGA investigation and pushed by the organization's policy team, a landmark criminal justice reform bill passed the General Assembly and was [signed into law last year](#). The bill requires the recording of interrogations for eight additional felonies (to join homicide interrogations). Many believe that recording interrogations can help prevent the forced confessions and other misconduct that have led to dozens of wrongful convictions in Illinois.

In 2011, the BGA and the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University School of Law, revealed that more than [80 innocent people spent more than 900 years in prison](#) for violent crimes they didn't commit, costing taxpayers more than \$200 million. Last year, [an update to that investigation](#) showed that taxpayers have paid an additional \$40 million for wrongful convictions since 2011.

If you don't see the video above, [click here and watch it on NBC5](#).

Also, one of the BGA's legislative priorities from a year ago has yielded some important results. Last year the General Assembly created the Illinois Blood Alcohol Content Task Force, which recently

recommended a blood-alcohol content ceiling of 0.02 for first responders.

A series of BGA/NBC5 investigations last year found that several collective bargaining agreements for police and fire in some of Illinois's largest cities included provisions allowing first responders to have levels as high as 0.08 before they could be eligible for discipline.

Local issues on the BGA's radar include the Chicago City Council's Privatization and Transparency Accountability Ordinance, which remains in the rules committee and has yet to have a full hearing on the City Council floor despite calls from many aldermen to do so.

And the BGA continues to monitor Chicago's Infrastructure Trust, whose first project was only just approved by City Council earlier this month.

The BGA is also examining restrictions for ex-felons seeking county and state office in light of two City of Chicago officials previously convicted of public corruption who've recently submitted nominating petitions in quest of seats on the Cook County board. State law bars such individuals from seeking municipal office but not county or state office.

It is shaping up to be an ambitious and active year for the BGA. We'll stay in touch.