



Shaw: Is IL Ready To Attack Bureaucratic Bloat And Save Money?

Description

There comes a time—a day of reckoning actually—when important issues that generally make our eyes glaze over because of their discomfiting terminology start making us mad.

Lamentations on our “crumbling infrastructure”• moving from public policy forums to close encounters with jarring potholes, Congressional “debt ceiling”• debates ending in debilitating government shutdowns, alarmist commentaries on “unfunded pension liabilities”• foreshadowing costly credit downgrades and tax hikes.

Crossing those thresholds from nerdy “government-speak”• to visceral reality can create the political equivalent of “critical mass”—enough pressure to prompt long overdue reforms.

I relish those transcendent opportunities, and I’m hoping we’re on the verge of another one propelled by an arcane phrase in our watchdog lexicon: “units of government”• “public bodies that offer services and levy taxes.

Illinois has more than any other state—about 7,000—or 2,000 more than runner-ups Texas and California.

Several years ago the [Better Government Association](#) launched a “smart streamlining”• campaign to illuminate the perils of this bureaucratic bloat: the waste, inefficiency and high cost—fiscal and human—of maintaining too many overlapping, duplicative and unnecessary tax-eaters.

Our colleagues at the Metropolitan Planning Council followed up by assembling a [“Transform Illinois”• coalition](#) of good government groups that lobbied successfully in Springfield this year for passage of [a bill](#) that empowers every Illinois county to start consolidating or eliminating valueless government offices.

That can be a game-changer, but it’s a daunting, multi-year challenge that depends on a commitment from enlightened state and local leaders and engaged citizens, and MPC is arming them with eye-opening data that provides a downsizing rationale based on the severity of the problem.

Last year, MPC [took a deep dive](#) into the staggering cost of administration in Illinoisâ?? 800-plus school district offices, which collectively spend more than \$2 billion a year on salaries, benefits, buildings, vehicles and equipmentâ??dollars that could be gradually shifted into classrooms, or returned to taxpayers, by consolidating the smallest districts into larger ones and cutting excessive administrative overhead.

The savings could eventually cover much of the added cost of the stateâ??s new K-12 funding plan.

MPCâ??s latest report finds that [Illinois could save another \\$2 billion a year](#) if per capita spending on our library, park and fire prevention districtsâ??yes, we have more of those than any other stateâ?? matched the nationwide average for those services.

Conversely, [Illinois spends much less](#) per capita on key social servicesâ??support for low-income families, health clinics, public hospitals and indigent care at private hospitalsâ??than other high-population states.

MPC concludes â??the very structure of local government in Illinois may be robbing the state and its citizens of precious limited dollars to serve some of its basic needs, and in particular those of its most vulnerable citizens.â?•

That concern is playing out in real time, according to [a recent BGA story](#) in Crainâ??s on the Rauner administrationâ??s decision to cut reimbursements to already-beleaguered social service agencies by \$89 million this fiscal year.

The question now is whether the term â??units of governmentâ?• is still too wonky to prompt real reform, or close enough to â??critical massâ?• to spawn a statewide downsizing movement.

Bureaucratic bloat may not jolt us like potholes, inconvenience us like government shutdowns, or whack us like big tax hikesâ??itâ??s not a gut punchâ??but if itâ??s troubling enough to embolden strong leaders and dedicated citizens, equipped with compelling data, to lead a campaign to save tax dollars, improve the lives of Illinois residents, and give us the better government weâ??re entitled to, the BGA and other reform groups will have their backs.