



## Dillon: Time to Bite the Bullet on Consolidation

### Description

Fire protection districts, airport authorities, cemetery districts, sanitation districts, street lighting districts, museum districts, road districts, library districts, mosquito abatement districts. â??! the list just keeps going. Illinois has almost 7,000 taxing units, far more than any other state. It also has the nationâ??s second-highest property tax burden.

Think of the cost of all those overlapping governments. Think of the pension liabilities. See the problem?

A new Property Tax Relief Task Force â?? at least the fifth in recent memory â?? has until the end of the year to recommend ways to lower those taxes. Hmmm. More state funding for schools would take some pressure off the locals. So would fewer costly state mandates that donâ??t come with the money to carry them out.

But consolidating some of those local governments is sure to be high on the list. Itâ??s an idea that comes up in any serious discussion about property tax relief.

So why doesnâ??t it happen? Why do we still have almost 7,000 of them?

You can always count on pushback from the local governments themselves. Township supervisors and sanitary district trustees tend to bristle at the suggestion that their work is redundant. They provide important services, close to the people who pay for them. Local control, local jobs.

Lawmakers are sensitive to those arguments and reluctant to take anything away from their constituents. And of course more governments mean more government jobs to pass out. So they donâ??t force the issue.

Why donâ??t taxpayers demand an overhaul of this wasteful setup? Largely because they believe they get better service if they run their own parks, schools, sanitary districts and mosquito trucks. And maybe theyâ??re right about that. Maybe they think itâ??s worth the extra cost.

Or maybe they haven't scrutinized their tax bills and wondered if all those line items are necessary. Maybe they'll examine them more closely now that the deduction for state and local taxes is capped at \$10,000 on federal tax returns.

We've seen some baby steps lately toward consolidation.

In 2014, voters in the Chicago suburb of Evanston chose to merge the city and Evanston Township, a relatively easy feat since the boundaries were the same.

DuPage County has eliminated seven taxing units since 2012 under a pilot program OK'd by the General Assembly.

And a new law will allow McHenry County voters to dissolve townships, though it's not at all clear that they want to. (The same law eliminates six Lake County road districts that maintain fewer than 15 miles of pavement, including one that is responsible for only 1.8 miles.)

So that's progress. But Illinois isn't going to make a big dent in property taxes by folding all those mosquito abatement districts into county governments. Sooner or later, the state will have to tackle school district consolidation. There are more than 850 school districts statewide, and one in four includes only one school. That leads to a lot of duplicative administrative costs.

Close to two-thirds of local property taxes go to schools, so the potential for savings is great. But the potential for resistance may be greater. Schools are the heart of many communities, and local control often matters more to parents than lower taxes. It will take a strong sales pitch to convince them they can have both.

The Property Tax Relief Task Force was created after a handful of Democratic lawmakers expressed reservations about putting Gov. J.B. Pritzker's progressive income tax amendment on the November 2020 ballot. They didn't want to sign off on a plan to raise more revenue without also looking for ways to cut those onerous property taxes. Good for them.

But creating a task force is the easy part. The hard part will be acting on its recommendations. The tough solutions have been in plain sight all along.