



It's 2008, Not 1851

Kernan Offers Insights on Local Government Reform

By Rebecca Patrick

The year was 1851. Napoleon was ruling France, Millard Fillmore served as the 13th U.S. president and Indiana celebrated 35 years of statehood.

Many innovations have progressed and new ones introduced in the century and a half since, yet one constant from that time continues to make headlines today: Indiana's local government structure. In the last decade, increased talk has taken place on how Indiana needs a makeover, but, for the most part, talk is all that's happened.

Just before the start of the 2008 General Assembly, the Indiana Commission on Local Government Reform released 27 far-reaching recommendations on areas in which Hoosiers could realize better delivery of services. At press time several bills that included elements of the commission's proposals were still alive in the Legislature, but this is an issue that won't see a transformation overnight and will undoubtedly be back in the spotlight during the 2009 session.

Former Indiana Gov. Joe Kernan, who served as co-chair of the commission with Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Randall Shepard, has witnessed local government from different perspectives during his career, including as city controller and mayor of South Bend. He says it's imperative we realize how out of date our system is.

"I don't believe there are any other organizations still operating today designed exactly the way they were 150 years ago. That's what we have in Indiana. That's what we have to change," he declares. "We owe it to ourselves and we owe it to our children that they are not in a system, not being governed by a system, at the local level that doesn't work to the greatest degree possible."

Trying townships

A good place to start is with perhaps the most archaic aspect of all local government: townships.

"The original design for townships was three miles by two miles. That was the distance you had to have for people to have easy access to local elected officials. That clearly is not true today. Township government has become really another layer that delivers, in many cases, services that are already provided in the community," Kernan offers.

"It is a redundant form of government. I think it's confusing to people. Those services can be delivered at a different level of government, and we believe much more effectively and in a way that will be much easier for people to understand."

The commission called for the elimination of township government, with all the emergency services (fire and police protection, etc.) going over to the county. A few officials currently in the trenches of township government are even starting to publicly acknowledge there is merit to the idea.

One is Brown Township Trustee Al Hornaday of Morgan County. He recently told the *Reporter-Times* in Martinsville: "My overall opinion, I'm simply in total agreement with it. There are trustees in Morgan County that write a check to the fire department once a year, and that's it.

I've said for the last two years that township trustee is an antiquated office. I think it's an expense that we can do without."

On top of emergency services and administering poor relief, township government is presently responsible for the state's most hot-button issue of all – property tax assessing and its lack of consistency and fairness, with 1,008 officials of varying expertise on the job.

"The Indiana Constitution says that we have to have a uniform system for assessing the value of property for the purposes of taxation. When you have that many people who are separately elected across the state of Indiana, that's never going to happen," Kernan asserts.

"In order to do that, we have to simplify it. We believe that should be done with one appointed assessor in every county (for 92 total assessors) – that person being held accountable to the county executive and the county council for the delivery of those services."

Cut the county fat

While townships have their own set of tribulations, in no area does there seem to be more of a lack of accountability than at the county level. As a remedy, the commission suggests one single county executive should be in charge to provide order.

"County government today effectively has 11 members of the executive branch who are separately elected. I don't think you would use multiple executives to manage any organization that have their own silo, their own individual responsibility, without coordinating that with the mission of the whole – in this case the administration of services that are provided by the county," Kernan explains.

"Because of three commissioners instead of one and because of the eight other elected offices (that we recommend become appointed offices), you end up with people not required to cooperate with each other and issues that are unable to be addressed in the day-to-day operation of county government."

Like their township counterparts, a few county officials are speaking out in support of the commission's proposal for a county executive.

"I think it's great. It makes perfect sense," said Henry County Councilman Nate LaMar in the March 1 edition of *Budget & Tax News*. "It will (however) take courageous elected officials not only willing to give up their own offices but also urge their colleagues to do the same."

Added Wayne County Commissioner Ken Paust, a single executive in place of the three commissioners "could work very well."

Pledge for public safety

While many areas of the commission's report focus on cost savings and efficiency, there are additional factors at play in regard to security and safety of Hoosiers.

"Today in Indiana we have 1,150 different agencies that provide



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police protection, fire protection and/or emergency medical services. In most communities, those are not coordinated with each other. We believe that there should be coordination, on a countywide basis, of delivery of those services," Kernan shares.

There are numerous examples of separate city and county communication departments in the same building. Beyond being inefficient, Kernan says "having multiple dispatch centers within one county is completely unacceptable.

"It is a redundancy of systems that is unnecessary and causes confusion; it is a redundancy that typically does not allow for communication between different dispatch centers. There are tremendous economies that can be realized by having one instead of multiple centers. The ability of communities to do this is already there through interlocal

agreements, but unfortunately there are still many communities that have not come on board.

"This is a matter of not just homeland security, but the quality of services that is provided on a day-to-day basis by first responders across the state of Indiana – and Hoosier lives are at stake," Kernan declares.

Schools and libraries

The topic of schools is another that stirs much emotion. What Kernan and the commission honed in on, however, relates much more to controlling costs instead of promoting consolidation.

"If you look at where local governments spend most of their money, it's in schools. And if you look at the cost of some construction, if you look at the cost of some administration, we believe there are some things that can be done that will provide lower costs and, at the same time, not compromise the quality of services that are provided; not compromise the ability to keep schools open; not compromise the ability to make new investments in school buildings," he states.

"By doing things more efficiently, we believe we can provide more resources to pay our teachers better and put more into our classrooms so that every kid gets the kind of education they deserve."

Hand-in-hand with a good education is expanding your vocabulary and horizons through reading. The commission was stunned to discover that 400,000 Hoosiers are without library service.

"We know from experience that access to library services is one of the windows to the world that children and families are able to take advantage of when they don't have it somewhere else, or are looking to things to add to what they might already have," Kernan states.

"It is a crime that those services are unavailable to so many. We believe that a countywide library system in all counties in Indiana will provide that service to all Hoosiers."

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Commission report and additional information available at www.indianachamber.com/propertytax