



from your Executive Director

By Bryan E. Smith

TOI Executive Director

Citizens are the Real “Losers” in Consolidation

THOMAS JEFFERSON ONCE SAID, “The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” How true that statement has been for township officials over the last couple of months, as local government has come under attack. Effective democracy requires that units of government be small enough for voters to be in control. This is indicated by the fact that smaller local governments tend to spend less per capita on basic public services than larger local government. Local governments, especially townships, know how to stay within their means. Townships in Illinois are particularly cost-effective because of their generally lower labor costs and the fact that they use part-time labor to a far greater degree than other levels of government in the state.

Proponents of eliminating local governments never tire of noting that Illinois has more state and local taxing jurisdictions than any other state. This is irrelevant. Government efficiency is indicated by spending, not the number of taxing jurisdictions. There is no relationship between tax burdens among the states and the number of taxing jurisdictions. Why would the state of Hawaii have the smallest number of local units of government, yet have among the highest tax burdens per capita in the nation? With only 18 units of local government and special districts, Hawaii taxes at a rate 15 percent above that of Illinois!

One of the principal reasons smaller local governments (townships) are more efficient is that they are closer to the people. This gives voters a far better chance to keep finances under control. As local governments become larger and more remote from residents, they are less accessible to voters and more accessible to special interests. This nearly always lead to higher taxes and more spending. Generally, voters have an interest in efficiency, providing a particular level of public services at the lowest cost. On the other hand, special interests have exactly the opposite objective as they routinely seek to increase spending. It is no wonder larger governments spend more and get into financial trouble more.

This ill-informed movement to forcibly eliminate local governments represents a serious threat to residents not only as taxpayers, but also in terms of service.

The voters of Perry County, a commission county in southern Illinois, experienced this firsthand. In 2004, voters approved by one vote a measure to eliminate the smaller road districts that had provided services for decades. They were told greater efficiency would be achieved if the road districts were replaced by one consolidated county entity. In turn, road maintenance suffered, especially in areas farther away from the central road facility. Voters indicated their disapproval in the November 2010 election by a 70 percent to 30 percent majority supporting the road districts re-establishment.

This year so far, Township Officials have responded admirably to our requests for contacting legislators when the need has arisen. For that, I give you my most heartfelt thanks. But now is not the time to let our guard down. We must, however, abide by Jefferson’s words and remain vigilant. In fact, it is more important now, more than ever before, to remain vigilant on promoting township government.

The local government elimination assault has many local governments and townships in its sights. But the real losers in the assault on democracy will be the citizens of the local governments forced to merge, who are likely to see higher taxes and reduced service levels.

Democracy and the “bigger the better” theory of government are simply incompatible.

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