

EXPLORING GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE
A Study of the League of Women Voters of McLean County
Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

In January 2015, Lieutenant Governor Sanguinetti formed the 'Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandates Task Force' to try to find a plan to address a longstanding concern that Illinois has too many units of Government to be efficient and effective. Acting on the belief that better government starts locally, and considering the uniqueness presented by our location, the League of Women Voters of McLean County adopted the Exploring Government Initiative (EGI) as one of their 2015-16 studies.

Scope and Methods

The purpose of the LWV MC Exploring Government Initiative was to study local governments in McLean County, IL - their number, functions, structures, and funding - to gain an understanding of the factors that impact these governments' capacity to provide effective services through efficient and economical operations. Special attention was focused on identifying present examples and future opportunities to cooperate, share services, and use best practices.

The primary methods used for this study included a review of other Illinois government efficiency and effectiveness studies and processes; gathering information about government units in McLean County; and face to face, standardized interviews with government officials, employees, and association leaders. A sample of governmental units was selected for study and their officials were invited to participate. Participation was voluntary.

Findings

Four other consolidation and efficiency efforts were reviewed, including the above mentioned statewide task force, the Sangamon County Citizens' Efficiency Commission (CEC), DuPage County, and the City of Evanston. Several recommendations emerged from the statewide taskforce. DuPage County has ongoing efforts that bear watching; the Evanston effort should be monitored for longer term results.

McLean County has eighteen types of governments and approximately 200 governmental units based on information from the McLean County Treasurer's office. Eleven government types (61% of the 18) were selected as the focus of this study, including townships, cities, towns, villages, the county and several special districts including library, airport authority, drainage, sanitary, water, fire protection and parks. School districts, unincorporated communities, cemeteries and other water districts were not studied.

A total of 45 interviews were conducted, 35 with government officials and employees, and another 10 interviews and meetings with related organizations and entities. See charts in the report for more specific information.

Several examples of shared services were found at the township level, particularly in the areas of property assessment and general assistance case work. Many more examples of intergovernmental

cooperation were identified across contiguous governmental units such as townships and their population centers (cities, towns, villages) and between the county and townships. These included joint materials purchases, shared rolling stock, and cooperative police and fire protection arrangements.

Quality improvement efforts included consortia, planning commissions and association membership for cities, towns, and townships, as well as special districts such as libraries. These organizations help officials maintain high standards, share training costs, and problem solve.

Several challenges were also identified across the 11 different governmental units studied. Challenges centered around limited citizen interaction and knowledge of government services, limited media coverage of governmental unit efforts, and difficulty finding citizens to stand for elections or be appointed to various governing boards. Lastly, maintaining services in an environment of declining or unstable state funds and declining population was a challenge mentioned by many township and county officials, and special district representatives.

Recommendations

The challenges of declining rural population and property valuation, leading to lower revenues, along with a decline in finding people to serve in government unit volunteer and official capacity, may create more of a risk to service delivery and quality than inefficiency, or 'waste' in the delivery of those services. Officials and personnel interviewed in this study consistently shared their interest in and efforts to be wise stewards of the funding they received. Voluntary consolidation of Townships or Special Districts may provide a way to address the trend of declining resources and leadership.

Questions remain about whether an independent, comprehensive review of each government unit would be necessary for a thorough assessment of effectiveness and efficiency, or if other methods could be just as productive. For example, state or local grants to governmental units to conduct their own self-study process could be tried. Perhaps an effort could be conducted through an association or a university, or developing a commission, as Sangamon County has done.

Study leaders recommend that the Illinois League (LWVIL) investigate eliminating elections for property assessors, and instead rely upon township boards to contract directly with qualified people.

As was discovered by the CEC in Sangamon County and in several local planning groups, it is far easier and perhaps more productive to use informal agreements to share service providers than to make structural changes to the authority of existing governmental units or taxing bodies.

A comparison of our findings to the DuPage county approach/model may be a good next step for additional study in resource sharing.

Study leaders recommend that government officials continue to facilitate cross-government problem solving, such as planning commissions, councils, consortia, and the use of contracted providers. While these methods beg the question about whether the current system can remain sufficiently funded to deliver and/or purchase the services the unit is responsible for, they do create a forum to be creative and resourceful in the meantime.