



# from your Executive Director

By Bryan E. Smith

TOI Executive Director

## **Local Government Consolidation Would Not Work as Advertised**

**I** HEAR THE SAME BATTLE CRY all too often, it goes something like this: If we want to begin to address the financial crisis in Illinois, let's consolidate local government taxing bodies. In the *Springfield State Journal Register* in the past year, the Better Government Association lamented the large number of local Illinois taxing bodies, calling for consolidation while urging readers to "think of the pension liabilities."

I believe the motivation behind this call for consolidation is pure and well-intended, but I disagree with some of the key promised outcomes.

Here's why:

An analysis by public policy research Wendell Cox discovered that in Illinois, smaller local governments have a cost savings of nearly 50 percent more per capita than larger governments. Townships are cost-conscious and find ways to keep overhead low. Much of the township cost savings come from salaries—for example, township salaries are 40 percent lower than state workers' salaries. Plus, townships much more frequently save money by employing a more cost-conscious, part-time labor force, which limits the need for related benefits such as pensions.

Allow me to emphasize that last portion. By maintaining 71,000 miles of roads and bridges, assessing real estate, and providing important social services at the township level instead of hiring more city, state, or county workers, the result is that salaries are lower, the workers are often part-time, and ultimately result in a more limited number of publicly funded pensions. Most seem to agree that the services rendered by township employees are necessary, so I assert that taxpayers would pay more, not less, by hiring more super-sized government employees to replace a more lean, dedicated township workforce.

At what level should the call for consolidation of local government stop? Should we examine the elimination of aldermanic wards because we have cities, or consolidate towns because we have larger counties? The argument would never end until we had one central unit of ineffective, disconnected government remaining.

It's easy to look at the state's high numbers of taxing bodies and think that townships are just another reason for Illinois' financial crisis, but as the executive director of the Township Officials of Illinois, I can tell you that townships are an extremely efficient and cost-effective unit of government.

Many people in the world are denied the opportunity to communicate directly with those they elect to office. We live in a state and nation where we can communicate with lawmakers by phone, mail, fax, or email. Letter writing or communication is not the sole responsibility of the voters it should be a cooperative effort between the voters and those that represent them in local government.

We in township government have a great opportunity to change the course of our own communities. We can do it, not by just being militant, but by being aware and by communicating what our needs are to our state and federal leaders and what the needs of our constituents are. We need to work towards equal recognition for townships in all parts of the state. We can do all of these things, but only if we try. If we don't make the effort, our future certainly is gloomy. The future of township government is not based on "gloom and doom." Our combined efforts have produced a golden history. The right kind of effort by everyone can make the future even brighter.

Government works best when it is closely connected and accountable to its constituents. Townships are a great fit for that motto, don't you think?

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