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Letter to the Editor Submission Regarding Government Modernization

By David Bottorff
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Indiana County Government: there when you need it.

Taxpayers should be wary of efforts to eliminate county elected government officials and replace elected positions with appointed people. If it comes down to democracy vs. appointed bureaucracy, the choice seems abundantly clear: democracy. A commission appointed by the Governor to find efficiencies in government recommends doing away with many county elected officials. The report has some positive recommendations but eliminating the opportunity for taxpayers to serve their communities is not one of them. One size or form of government does not fit all communities.

Framers of Indiana's Constitution designed county government to carry out state laws and policies. To create a balance of power between state government and the citizens throughout the state, the designers of the State Constitution believed voters should directly elect people from their county to administer state laws. Why should that be changed? No evidence has been produced that appointed people will do a better job than elected people. In 1851 it would have been easy to allow the state to appoint people in each county to administer state laws. However, framers of the State Constitution must have been concerned about too much power being concentrated in state government or in the hands of too few people.

Evolving Local Government

Supporters of the elimination of county elected officials often claim that the local government structure of 1851 has not evolved, but clearly it has evolved. The functions of the county officeholders change every time the General Assembly completes a session.

At one time, townships were in charge of schools and roads; now school boards and counties handle those services. County councils were created because the General Assembly believed county commissions had too much power. What should change is the proliferation of sub-county units and non-elected boards with tax and spending authority. Some progress was made on this effort during the 2008 session of the General Assembly. However, non-elected boards have flourished in recent decades, creating a wide range of property tax rates within a county and varying levels of service. Many services performed by sub-county units could be done more uniformly and efficiently on a county-wide basis, implemented by elected and accountable officeholders.

Elected officials directly responsible to the voters are much more likely to look out for the best interest of taxpayers than non-elected persons or boards. County government officials include nearly every aspect of society: current and former business owners, farmers, teachers and employees with a variety of backgrounds. In general, county elected officials are concerned citizens who want to contribute or give something back to their communities. Advocates of a centralized more bureaucratic government with minimal elected officials ignore the fact that county government requires teamwork and consensus building, a primary goal of democracy. Moving to appointed positions limits the ability of voters to select their local leaders and limits the ability of citizens to serve their community.

Cost Savings by replacing elected officials with appointed people?

The Shepard-Kernan report on local government has some proposals that will create efficiencies, save money or reduce property taxes by shifting funding to the state. Some of the proposals were enacted during the 2008 session of the General Assembly with the support of county elected officials. However, eliminating elected officials and replacing them with appointed people will make county government less accountable and more expensive. Appointed people usually demand a higher salary than people who are elected. Indiana county government provides the basic services for citizens: criminal justice, elections, land records, tax administration, economic development and much more. Citizens should be wary of attempts to take power away from them and give it to a centralized government with limited access points. County elected officials are there when you need them and county government is there when you need it. They work directly for you. Why change that?

The Association of Indiana Counties, Inc. is a nonprofit organization that was established in 1957 for the betterment of county government. The various functions of the AIC include lobbying the Indiana General Assembly on behalf of counties, serving as liaison among counties, state and federal agencies as well as providing technical assistance and training to county officials and employees.

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NOTE TO RADIO REPORTERS: We have a raw interview with David Bottorff as well as edited soundbites along with a cut sheet available at <http://www.aicpodcast.org/ShepardKernan>