



The Patriot-News

EXTRANEOUS

Proliferation of governments, officials clutters local ballots

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After a candidate was elected to be a Newberry Twp. auditor with only two write-in votes, many residents of the northern York County community wondered if such a low vote total was legal. (It is.)

But a more important question might be whether this office should be on the ballot in the first place. Newberry, like many other municipalities, hires an outside, private auditing firm.

The same question could be raised about local assessors, which are still elected in many counties despite the presence of county tax assessment offices.

At the county level, Cumberland commissioners have questioned the need for jury commissioners, whose tasks of organizing jury pools are now largely performed by court administrators.

Beyond casting a spotlight on the need for such posts in 21st century Pennsylvania, the situation in Newberry again illustrates the archaic nature of local government in this state. Although individual counties can take some steps on their own -- Dauphin County abolished assessors in the 1980s -- what is needed is a statewide commission to conduct a top-to-bottom review of local government.

We realize a Local Government Commission already exists that comprises five state senators and five House members, appointed by the Senate president pro tempore and the House speaker. It has a paid staff that performs legislative research and is responsible for updates for various codes governing counties, townships and boroughs.

Frankly, it's hard to see where this commission has moved county and municipal government forward during its 72-year history. The state continues to boast more than 2,500 local government entities, has been painfully slow to move toward regionalization, and is still putting unnecessary offices on the ballot.

Instead, we'd suggest a special independent commission, perhaps under the auspices of the governor's office, whose representatives include county and municipal officials, private citizens and organizations and businesses that regularly deal with the local government apparatus.

It should study and make recommendations on where local governments could be consolidated, eliminating certain positions, updates for various municipal codes and any other steps that would lead to greater efficiencies and modernization.

As long-time critics of Pennsylvania's entangled web of local government and supporters of consolidation and regionalization, we realize such a commission would face a monumental task in having recommendations taken seriously by legislators and the public.

Provincial attitudes die hard in this state, and many public officials and citizens stick hard to the mantle that local government is the one closest to the people. These views fail to take into consideration the effectiveness and efficiencies, or lack thereof, of the current local government structure.

Fewer governments and fewer local positions do not mean the loss of any local identity or access to officials. Is West Fairview any less recognizable, and its citizens any less represented, since the former borough was incorporated into East Pennsboro Twp. several years ago?

Education and a greater degree of open-mindedness are sorely needed. Otherwise, the state is going to continue with a system that is unfriendly to business, creates costly duplications of services and

infrastructure, has numerous dwindling tax bases, and fails to recognize that many problems don't stop at, but instead cross, municipal borders.

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