

Eliminate County Government

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ten percent of our tax dollars goes towards county taxes. Is an additional layer of government adding value or is it driving up our taxes? Public opinion shows that county government is an under-utilized, non-responsive, invisible, and unaccountable form of government with duplicative services. This report proposes the elimination of Bergen County Government and explains how its elimination will directly benefit the taxpayers. Further, it provides an overview of how services previously offered through the county government can be undertaken by the local municipalities, private-public partnerships, and State government without loss in services and quality.

BENEFITS

Structurally, the proposed new system will eliminate and redistribute departments as shown below:

1. Eliminate the Board of Chosen Freeholders and the County Executive.
2. Eliminate clerk to the board, counsel to the board, and county administrator.
3. County Clerk and County Surrogate responsibilities would go to the state.
4. Eliminate the departments of Admin & Finance, Public Works, and State appointments. Most of the positions are duplicated at the state and town levels.
5. Roll up departments of Law, Human Services and Health Services, and Sheriff to the State level.
6. Push Planning and Parks to the town level.
7. Department of Public Safety gets split between the state and municipalities.

Savings and Impact

1. Each town has a clerk. According to the state commission of investigations, funding has been provided but little progress has been made in using technology to modernize record keeping. If the public is offered a way to file forms electronically, municipalities should be able to handle the County Clerk's work. This would save \$4.7 million.
2. If half of the public work budget gets allocated to the state, there would be over \$11 million saved.
3. The departments of Law & Public Safety, Law, Health Services & Human Services have a \$52 million budget. If half of these department budgets are reallocated to the State, there would be a \$26 million savings.
4. The new structure would be phased in with minimum disruption in services.

DISADVANTAGES

1. In terms of population and per capita income, the municipalities in Bergen County are very diverse. This creates a unique challenge in regionalization.
2. The citizens in the County are strong supporters of unions and home rule. It would also be difficult to make the amendments to the constitution necessary to eliminate key positions that are currently mandated by law.

OBSTACLES

1. It will be difficult to accomplish this unilaterally and will need bipartisan support politically from local and state government.
2. There will be a temporary increase in unemployment.
3. The escalating costs of supporting existing labor contracts and associated benefits are very challenging and unsustainable. A pragmatic approach to deal with this has to be formulated.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island have abolished county government due to mismanagement, duplication, inefficiencies, rising costs, corruption, and patronage. In addition, there is a proposal in its grass roots level in Westchester County, New York.
2. County governments were eliminated in these states by transferring the administrative responsibilities and costs of Welfare/Social Services, Court System, and County Clerk functions to the state.
3. In Massachusetts, a state-wide referendum was passed that limited the counties taxation power. The referendum put the county governments out of business by eliminating essentially their taxation driven revenue stream.
4. In Connecticut, the elimination of counties went quite smoothly. "On the day that the counties ended their 300-year existence, it is doubtful if many persons...were aware of the occasion." *County Government in Connecticut; Its History and Demise* by Rosaline Levenson.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

1. There is a need for a "Change Agent" who can sell and bring the change to the masses. This Change Agent should be a bold & courageous leader who can influence people from both sides of the aisle who has brains, guts, and passion. He should be driven towards the purpose of saving tax dollars and adding value to the community.
2. This Change Agent should be a visionary and be able to win the support of the County Executive, Freeholders, Assemblymen, Senators, Mayor, and councils.
3. He/she should be able to keep the citizens involved by using the traditional and new media. For example, newspapers, websites, television ads, Public Service Announcements (PSAs), and social networking.

CONCLUSION

1. Over 45% of county residents in Bergen County work in the Financial, Insurance, and Real Estate sectors. These have been hit hard by the recession. Just recently, the Governor's office suggested steep cuts to programs that benefit local communities as the cost of delivery have increased. People want services, without an ever-increasing tax bill.
2. 65% of our local taxes go towards education and there are over 600 school districts in New Jersey that don't share resources effectively. Hence, regionalization and shared services must play an important role in our sustainability.
3. In this maelstrom of economic uncertainty, change is inevitable. The status quo to provide current levels of services only increases the debt at all levels of the government. This jeopardizes not only our future but also the future of coming generations.

4. In short, we need to apply a more traditional business oriented “Value Received” analysis for all that we want or expect from our county government. Whether local, county, or state, in our view, there is little the county government does that can’t be more efficiently handled at either the state or local levels.

REFERENCES

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