ACT Initiative Press Clippings
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A skeeter in DuPage

Cronin's lament: If only the bug was as endangered as the taxpayer

June 08, 2012

If you're a mosquito in DuPage County, you ought to be an endangered species, given the number of governments supposedly trying to kill you.

But there's an even more endangered species in DuPage: taxpayers, mired like larvae in the muddy morass of more than 400 governmental units for their county alone. Consider:

DuPage has 45 separate entities — special districts, townships, municipalities — providing mosquito abatement services. Of those, 36 have signed separate contracts with the same vendor for the bug spray they use to keep the mosquito population down. If they pooled their buying power, no doubt they could get a better deal.

Here's the worst part: Spraying for skeeters has little lasting impact. The anti-bug mission could be carried out much more cheaply and efficiently under the county Health Department. The citizens of DuPage don't need any other mosquito abatement agencies, let alone 45.

So why do all these governments cling to this dubious mission? "They're very protective of their turf," DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin tells us.

The turf protection doesn't stop with mosquitoes. Take sanitary districts, which treat sewage and wastewater. The kitchen sinks and toilets of DuPage are more than abundantly served by these separate taxing bodies.

In a recent review, Cronin examined four of the county's sanitary districts. All were operating at a deficit. One, which had a $1 million budget deficit, nevertheless paid its executive director $152,000 a year plus a $12,000 bonus and a $500 monthly car allowance, Cronin found — noting that the executive director has a richer compensation package than the annual salaries of five Illinois statewide constitutional officers. A public servant commanding such rich compensation should be able to manage the affairs of four sanitary districts, right? Not in DuPage County.

Not yet, anyway.

Unfortunately, it's the same story across the state of Illinois — which has 7,000 school districts, townships, library boards, fire-protection districts and other government units, generally with
separate oversight and taxing authority. The Census Bureau says that's far more than the total in any other state.

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel are working to consolidate services and facilities — and otherwise squeeze redundancies out of their governments. Good for them. This isn't colorful work, and they're probably not getting enough credit for it.

Out in DuPage, too, Cronin has made a strong start. He's documenting where governments overlap, and where they can share services and facilities. He's holding himself accountable for delivering measurable savings from common-sense efficiencies. He wants to show that taking on the vested interests opposed to consolidation is well worth it to taxpayers. We're confident he's right.

Progress in DuPage is modest so far, but Cronin's effort holds promise.

So, let's see, that's two counties — Cook and DuPage — trying visibly to unravel the many redundancies in what this page has called The Government State. Are taxpayers in the other 100 counties benefiting from equally aggressive efforts? And if not, will politicians for county offices across Illinois be smart enough to campaign on this infrastructure-streamlining, cost-cutting agenda?

Here's hoping the spotlight that Cronin has fixed on wasteful government practices will achieve the substantial savings he foresees.

Taxpayers have everything to gain, and the mosquitoes of DuPage County have everything to lose.
DuPage County taxpayers will save nearly $600,000 thanks to Election Commission’s shared services with county

By Mary Beth Versaci, mbversaci@mysuburbanlife.com

Wheaton Leader

Posted Sep 07, 2012 @ 11:21 AM

Wheaton, IL — The DuPage County Election Commission will save taxpayers nearly $600,000 through a series of cost-saving efforts, mainly centered on consolidating services with the county.

The shared services include shifting the Election Commission website hosting to the county's system to save $146,400, consolidating IT personnel with the county to save $402,400, consolidating vote center liability insurance with the county, which will increase coverage and reduce liability, and consolidating its Microsoft Enterprise Agreement with the county to save $12,000.

The Commission is making other cost-saving efforts, such as changing the its cellphone policy, saving $24,300, and eliminating a T1 broadband line, saving $12,300.

All initiatives will net these savings over the next three years. They are a result of the DuPage ACT Initiative (Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency) led by DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin. The changes at the Election Commission have been implemented by new Election Commission board members who were recently appointed by Cronin — Board Chairperson Cathy Ficker Terrill, Art Ludwig and Chris Hage.
November 24, 2012 07:53 AM

Thanks to Pols Who Got it Right

*In the spirit of the season, we’re recognizing political figures who advanced the cause of better government following BGA investigations, regardless of their motivation.*

By Andy Shaw/BGA

Watchdogs sniff out a lot of bad behavior by public officials — some intentional, some inadvertent — and while many of the culprits ignore the disclosures, others with the power to correct the situation do just that.

So, in the spirit of the season, we’re recognizing those who advanced the cause of better government following BGA investigations, regardless of their motivation.

Kudos to:

**The Illinois General Assembly.** It took a while — decades actually — but state lawmakers finally did the right thing by eliminating the much-abused legislative scholarship program. They actually gave up a popular perk because of its misuse, which is something we don’t see very often in Illinois.

**Mayor Rahm Emanuel.** He canceled hundreds of credit cards that city employees were using to enhance their comfort and lifestyle, not serve the public. Flowers, gifts, airline and hotel upgrades, pricey meals — even to pay traffic tickets. The mayor’s move will save taxpayers millions in unnecessary expenditures.

**Gov. Pat Quinn.** PQ has been known to change his mind on major issues, but when it comes to gambling expansion he’s consistently opposed bad bets approved by the state Legislature. Quinn vetoed a bill with overblown revenue projections, ethical shortcomings and taxpayer exposure on a Chicago casino plan. Hopefully, the next gaming bill will reflect his legitimate concerns.

**Illinois Senator Kirk Dillard.** He persuaded the state Senate to overturn one of Illinois’ more blatant pension abuse schemes, a one-off law that allowed a former Oak Brook police chief to sweeten his pension by $30,000 a year, while sticking Oak Brook taxpayers with a tab of at least $750,000. The bill stalled in the House when Speaker Michael Madigan questioned its legality, so a new version is being drafted. All aboard, Mr. Speaker.
Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle. Last January, she launched an internal audit to see if county departments and agencies were properly listing employee job descriptions and salaries in their budgets. This followed disclosure of serious irregularities in the Cook County treasurer’s office, including more than $343,000 in questionable salaries for staffers whose job titles had little or nothing to do with the work they actually performed. Audit results are due out shortly and should make for some interesting reading.

DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin. He reacted to stories about efficiency and accountability shortcomings in DuPage government by cutting the budget and pledging to eliminate overlapping and unnecessary taxing bodies. Good start.

Chicago Board of Education. CPS canceled annual payouts of $30 million for unused sick days, and saved additional tax dollars by renegotiating a "sour" milk contract with a clout-heavy company. A-plus on both.

Lansing Village Board. Trustees finally eliminated a retiree pension sweetener that village taxpayers can’t afford, even if it made sense decades ago. Better late than never.

We don’t always agree with these public servants; in fact, we frequently criticize their governing decisions. But it’s important, and it’s right, to acknowledge magic moments when government puts the public ahead of the public officials, since we’re paying the bills.

So we hope they all had a happy Thanksgiving. This time they were not the turkeys.
DuPage meeting puts emphasis on strong ethics policies

By Hank Beckman

For The Sun, Feb 28, 2013

In an age when most people don’t trust government officials, ethics guidelines are more important than ever.

That seems to be a motivation for DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin, who Tuesday participated in a two-hour ethics training session for county elected and appointed officials.

The meeting is a part of the county’s efforts to provide uniform ethics guidelines for not only elected officials and county employees, but also appointed officials on DuPage’s 24 independent agencies.

At a press conference afterwards, Cronin noted, “we have a lot of different pieces in county government,” and stressed the need for having DuPage governing bodies on the same page on ethics policy.

“We discovered we didn’t have a good, uniform standards for ethics,” he said of a 2012 review of the county’s independent agencies.

Cronin was joined at the session Tuesday by DuPage State’s Attorney Robert Berlin, Investigator General Paul Moreschi, Ethics Commission Chairman Gerald Cassioppi and Ethics Advisor Dan Hanlon.

Independent agencies were not previously covered by the county’s ethics ordinance, a situation that Cronin sought to rectify with the 2012 DuPage Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency initiative.

Seventeen of the 24 agencies have adopted the ordinance so far, with one noticeable exception being the DuPage County Sheriff’s Department, recently on the losing end of a discrimination lawsuit.

But Cronin said he expected 100 percent compliance by the various agencies. Of the Sheriff’s Department, he would only say: “They’ve not yet adopted our ordinance.”

The 24 agencies in question account for about $300 million in public money and employ 900 people. Areas covered by the county ordinance include whistleblower protection, limits on campaign contributions for those seeking county business, prohibited political activities, conflicts of interest and prohibited gifts.
Moreschi indicated that the policy itself has not changed significantly.

"There aren't a lot of substantive changes," he said.

He said the process for reporting ethics violations is simple. The process begins with a person reporting an incident that they think violates the ordinance, and then making a complaint to Moreschi's office. Forms can be found on the county website.

Moreschi is then charged with conducting an investigation and ultimately decides whether the complaint merits further investigation.

If he feels the matter warrants further deliberation, he will refer the matter to the Ethics Commission, which will decide what action, if any, to take.

Possible penalties include reprimands, fines, suspension or termination. If warranted, some cases may result in criminal prosecution.

Cassioppi echoed Cronin's sentiments about the need for uniformity in the ethics rules across the county's groups.

"It makes sense to have one standard," he said.

Cronin said that the most significant aspect of the day's training seminar was that for the first time, so many people from the county and different agencies were in the same room talking about the subject of ethics.

"We're building a good team," he said.

District 5 County Board member James Healy of Naperville said he thought a better way to conduct the training would be to send the county's ethics team to each of the individual agencies, but he approved of the initiative.

"It makes sense," he said. "It's a shared service."

District 5 County Board Tony Michelass from Aurora attended and came away upbeat.

"It's good that we see that type of cooperation between our elected officials and those we appoint," he said.
By Robert Sanchez

The protracted legal effort needed to disband a sanitary district that hadn’t served a useful purpose for years is being cited by DuPage County officials as another reason why they want state lawmakers to give them the authority to consolidate some taxing bodies.

A DuPage judge last week agreed to dissolve the Timberlake Estates Sanitary District in the southeastern part of the county. The ruling came after the county received permission from at least two-thirds of the residents living within the district — bound by 87th Street, 91st Street, Clarandon Hills Road and Route 63 — to eliminate it.

"This is a threshold moment for us in DuPage," county board Chairman Dan Cronin said Monday. "I don't know when or if a unit of local government has ever been dissolved in the state of Illinois."

The process to dissolve the sanitary district took nearly two years, even though it stopped providing service to residents in the mid-1980s and wasn't levying a property tax.

Formed in 1983 by residents as a special taxing district to provide sanitary sewer service, the district relinquished its responsibilities to the county two years after its sewer system was installed.

Cronin said the process required to eliminate the sanitary district is an example of why DuPage needs the authority to consolidate some of the 24 local governmental agencies overseen by boards and commissions that he appoints.

The chairman is working with state lawmakers to approve legislation that would let local officials "pursue measures to consolidate or eliminate obsolete taxing districts and foster greater efficiencies and collaboration," officials said.

"I need this tool from the state," Cronin said of the proposed legislation. "We can't afford to spend two years on every unit of government we want to address."
State Senate panel backs letting DuPage cut some governments

By Mike Rispell

SPRINGFIELD — DuPage County could get the power to shrink or dissolve 13 county governments and agencies under a plan approved by an Illinois Senate committee Wednesday.

DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin was in Springfield asking lawmakers for approval for the legislation, sponsored by state Sen. Tom Cullerton of Villa Park.

Agencies that could get review under the proposal include the Canty Hill Lighting District, Downers Grove Sanitary District, Highland Hills Sanitary District, Salt Creek Sanitary District and West Chicago Mosquito Abatement District.

Cronin said getting local control to dissolve agencies takes the power out of the hands of state lawmakers who might not want to do it.

"We can debate the issue at the local level," Cronin said.

The bill would affect DuPage County government agencies for which the county chairman appoints all or most board members, not including fire protection districts or some water districts.

Lawmakers approved the plan by a unanimous vote. It could be changed in the future to clarify the section about firefighters.

The plan doesn’t allow county leaders to decide whether to dissolve the Forest Preserve District. It’s been a hot-button question after state Rep. Dennis Rebovich, an Elmhurst Republican, filed legislation to have the county board do the forest preserve district board’s job in an effort to save money.

Cronin again didn’t back that plan Wednesday and said the idea would have to clearly both retain services and save money.

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Zombie Government

Theres one thing down, but Illinois needs to hold thousands more of the living dead.

EDITORIALS

Chicago Tribune

Founded June 1847
Senate: Let DuPage leaders eliminate governments

By Mike Rhoppel

SPRINGFIELD — DuPage County officials might soon have the option to eliminate about a dozen local governments after an Illinois Senate vote Thursday.

The plan backed by DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin doesn't touch the controversial recent idea of consolidating the county's forest preserve district with the county government.

But it would give Cronin and the county board the authority to eliminate districts like the Century Hill Lighting District, Downers Grove Sanitary District, Highland Hills Sanitary District, Salt Creek Sanitary District and West Chicago Mosquito Abatement District.

The measure was approved by a 51-0 vote and was sponsored by state Sen. Tom Cullerton, a Villa Park Democrat.

"It's no secret Illinois has way too many layers of government," Cullerton said in a statement.

The plan now moves to the Illinois House, where lawmakers recently rejected the idea of stripping forest preserve district board members of their salaries.
Tom Cullerton’s bill to shrink government moves forward

By Idraganov, Community Contributor

3:49 PM CDT, April 25, 2013

"It’s no secret Illinois has way too many layers of government. My goal here is to make DuPage County a leader in streamlining government, while at the same time ensuring taxpayers get quality services." – Senator Tom Cullerton

SPRINGFIELD – State Senator Tom Cullerton’s (D-Villa Park) proposal to reduce government in DuPage County passed the Senate on Thursday. This proposal gives the DuPage County Board the ability to consolidate smaller levels of local government.

"It’s no secret Illinois has way too many layers of government," Cullerton said. "My goal here is to make DuPage County a leader in streamlining government, while at the same time ensuring taxpayers get quality services."

Cullerton’s legislation, Senate Bill 494, allows the DuPage County Board to dissolve many appointed positions to provide taxpayers with a smaller, less costly and more efficient local government. The proposal also gives the option for voters to petition against the decision of the board if they choose. Current law requires a voter referendum to remove these appointed boards and authorities.

The proposed law comes on the heels of DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin’s review of the plethora of appointed agencies throughout the county. That review found small units of government that provide sanitary, mosquito abatement and street lighting services cost taxpayers $300 million annually and employ 900 people.

Under current law, the county was limited in its streamlining efforts. Cullerton’s proposal gives Cronin and DuPage County additional powers to continue looking for savings and efficiencies.

“The legislation will provide the County with the authority to take steps to dissolve obsolete agencies without having to deal with multiple layers of government red tape,” said Cronin.

The vote on Senate Bill 494 was 51 to 0. It now advances to the Illinois House.
BE GONE!

Editorial: Let DuPage pluck off useless government

May 21, 2013

There's a bill heading to Gov. Pat Quinn's desk that would make DuPage County a laboratory for efficient local government. It might even produce a magic trick: Watch this taxing body disappear!

The bill would let the DuPage County Board dissolve some government units by simply passing an ordinance. No, the board members couldn't go crazy. The law would require an audit and a six-month public review. Voters could seek a referendum to block the county board and save the local government.

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It all creates a reasonable process that could mean: Presto! One of the 6,969 units of government in Illinois would be no more.
DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin pushed this legislation after he ran into enormous obstacles in trying to eliminate one example of what he calls zombie governments.

The Timberlake Estates Sanitary District had handed all its responsibilities to another agency three decades ago but still showed up on property-tax bills. In April, 2011, Cronin's staff began an arcane process of mailings, door-to-door solicitations, public notices and legal submissions. In March — nearly two years after the process started — a judge finally signed off on eliminating the sanitary district.

Illinois has, by far, more local governments than any other state. DuPage County alone has more than 400 governments.

The bill approved by the House and Senate is narrowly drawn. It would provide DuPage County — and only DuPage County — with the authority to dissolve outdated or defunct agencies that are managed by governing boards appointed by the county. The bill could impact 13 entities, such as the Century Hill Street Lighting District, the Salt Creek Sanitary District and the Wheaton Mosquito Abatement District.

Would the world miss the Century Hill Street Lighting District, which has three trustees in charge of approving an annual levy of about $15,000 to pay for lights in a subdivision in unincorporated Naperville?

This is a modest, well-targeted bill, but it does help to draw attention to how much Illinois taxpayers get dinged for those 6,696 local governments.

Don't even get us started on townships ...

Removing unneeded layers of local government would help to deliver essential public services in a more efficient and cost-effective manner. It would help to eliminate the little fiefdoms that make it difficult for the region to plan and execute broadly on strategies for economic growth.

It would give taxpayers some relief. Have you looked at your property tax bill lately? You'll find a lot of claims on your money.

We encourage Quinn to sign the bill. We encourage Dan Cronin to keep pushing so this movement stretches beyond DuPage.

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From the Web
Dan Cronin's mission impossible: slashing the number of local governments

June 13, 2012

I'm tempted to call it mission impossible, and suggest that he keep any flammable materials far from his body.

But his timing is good, the goal laudable and his will apparently firm.

So here's wishing Dan Cronin success in his self-declared mission in his sophomore year as DuPage County Board chairman to consolidate, abolish or otherwise reduce the stunning 400 separate local government bodies that call the county of about a million people home.

"Let us be the leader, the demonstration model," Mr. Cronin told me over coffee a few days ago. "We need to eliminate units of government."

It's hard to argue with the chairman, who notes that he alone appoints members to 52 board and commissions.

For instance, DuPage has 45 different public entities — municipalities, districts and townships — that provide mosquito abatement services. All 45 collect taxes or fees for that cause, and 36 of them contract with the same provider.

Then there are separate fire protection districts, each of which tends to have its own expensive hook-and-ladder equipment, rather than sharing among themselves or nearby municipalities.

Consolidation like that "really needs to be done," says Bob Schillerstrom, who held the chairmanship for a good decade until last year.

Such duplication is a relic of the days when transportation was more difficult, or when bigger local units of government faced overly tight bonding caps, so they got around the law by creating lots of little units, he says. "That's no longer needed."

The DuPage Mayors and Managers Conference has begun to reach the same sort of conclusions, says its former chief, Gary Grasso, the mayor of Burr Ridge.

But its efforts to craft a fire-protection plan so far have taken a year and a half — and it's still in the study process, he reports.
Mr. Cronin says that it's been "a little hard to get the parties engaged." And he allows that he "still has the scars" from his prior work as a state senator to push school-district consolidation.

"Everybody who has a little kingdom is going to try to protect it," says Mr. Schillerstrom. "I think Dan is looking at all aspects of government for efficiency. That's probably the right thing to do."

Yes, it is. Not that one big government necessarily is the answer, either. And DuPage County has stumbled some in the past with airport commissions and the like.

But at a time when complaints about taxes are as high as ever, cutting the number of taxing bodies would seem to be the logical thing to do.

I mean, with 45 agencies going after mosquitoes — each with a board of directors and a staff — you'd think we could just give each of them a fly swatter and squish our way to success.

Sadly, it hasn't quite worked out that way. Good luck, Mr. Cronin. And don't forget the townships.
DuPage consolidation plan awaits Quinn’s OK

By Robert Sanchez

After touting consolidation as a way to save money and improve services, DuPage County officials soon will get the opportunity to prove it.

Gov. Pat Quinn within the next two weeks is expected to sign a measure that will give DuPage the authority to eliminate as many as 13 local governmental entities, including fire protection, sanitary and mosquito abatement districts.

"Now the heavy lifting will begin at the county level," county board Chairman Dan Cronin said during a recent meeting with the Daily Herald's editorial board.

Cronin pushed for the legislation after learning how difficult it is to eliminate a taxing body, even if it's found to be financially unstable, duplicative or unnecessary. Some entities can be dissolved only with voter approval.

The plan outlines a multistep process for eliminating a government entity and transferring its responsibilities elsewhere. There's also a way for voters to save an agency if they protest.

Sponsored by state Sen. Tom Cullerton, the measure in April was approved by the Illinois Senate in a 51-0 vote. Then in May, the Illinois House voted 108-6 to send the plan to Quinn.

A spokesman for Quinn on Tuesday said the governor has until Aug. 9 to sign the legislation into law.

"He supports the legislation and intends to sign it," spokesman David Blanchette said. "It eliminates duplication and, therefore, it benefits the taxpayer."

While Illinois has been criticized for having more units of local government than any other state, eliminating them can be contentious and often fails.

Supporters say they believe giving DuPage the power to dissolve or consolidate other units of government could help jump-start a larger effort.

"The issue of dissolving levels of government has been coming up forever," said Cullerton, a Villa Park Democrat. "Somebody had to break the mold and actually start. My goal would be to use their (DuPage officials') success."

Cronin says he wants DuPage to become the test case for the rest of the state.

"We will make sure it's done properly," Cronin said, "and we will be a demonstration model, hopefully, for the other 101 counties in the state."

The local governmental entities the state legislation allows DuPage to eliminate are overseen by boards and commissions that Cronin appoints. Cronin has said he's not necessarily looking to eliminate all 13 of them.
Quinn signs law to help DuPage consolidation efforts

Gov. Pat Quinn and DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin hold up a copy of a new law that lets DuPage eliminate as many as 13 local governmental entities.

Bev Horne | Staff Photographer

The work to abolish some of DuPage County's more than 400 taxing bodies now can begin.

Gov. Pat Quinn on Friday signed into law legislation giving DuPage the authority to eliminate as many as 13 local governmental entities, including fire protection, sanitary and mosquito abatement districts.

"I think it's landmark legislation," Quinn said after the signing ceremony at the county administration
building in Wheaton. "It's a great model for other counties all across our state. What we want to do now is convince other counties that this is the way to go."

Illinois lawmakers already had created a panel -- the Local Government Consolidation Commission -- to develop ways to trim the state's huge number of local governments when county board Chairman Dan Cronin pitched the idea of having DuPage become a "test case" for the rest of the state.

Cronin has been championing consolidation as a way to save taxpayer money and improve services since before taking office in January 2011. As board chairman, the former state senator has been trying to develop momentum for eliminating some of the local governmental entities overseen by boards and commissions he appoints.

State law had to be changed because of how difficult it is to eliminate a taxing body, even if it's found to be financially unstable, duplicative or unnecessary. Some entities could be dissolved only with voter approval.

As part of the measure, sponsored by state Sen. Tom Cullerton and state Rep. Deborah Conroy, multiple steps must be followed to eliminate a government entity and transfer its responsibilities elsewhere. There's also a process for voters to save an agency if they protest.

The new law takes effect immediately.

"An overly complicated and unnecessary web of local and county services helps no one," Cullerton, a Villa Park Democrat, said in a statement. "By streamlining government services, we will reduce the cost to taxpayers and improve the quality of those services."


Cronin said the county board must hold public hearings and demonstrate cost savings and other benefits of consolidation before taking action to eliminate a governmental entity.

"This is giving us the chance to take on some very, very serious responsibilities," Cronin said. "We welcome that, but we also recognize that it's not insignificant. There will be a lot of discussion and opportunity for people to talk about it."

The entities expected to be reviewed first by the county are the Century Hill Street Lighting District, Highland Hills Sanitary District and Fairview Fire Protection District.

While the new law is limited to DuPage, Conroy said she believes it will provide a boost to the state's larger consolidation effort. Illinois has nearly 7,000 units of local government, the most of any state in the nation.

"I think this changed the conversation in Springfield," said Conroy, a Villa Park Democrat. "Prior to this, we haven't been able to pass a bill like this. I think you'll see more of it in the future."
In the meantime, Cronin said, his goal is to show "measurable results" by consolidating one or more of the 13 agencies.

"At the end of the day," he said, "I want to show that it can be done."

The state's Local Government Consolidation Commission was supposed to make its recommendations by the end of last year. On Friday, Quinn extended the deadline for the commission's final report to Sept. 30.
New law allows DuPage to shrink government

Responsibilities of many non-elected agencies could be consolidated; some bureaucrats don't mind elimination

By Melissa Jenco and Matthew Walberg, Chicago Tribune reporters

August 5, 2013

How many government officials does it take to change a light bulb in a subdivision near Naperville?

Too many, according to advocates of streamlined government, who celebrated Gov. Pat Quinn's signature Friday on legislation that will allow DuPage County to consolidate or eliminate some government entities like the Century Hill Street Lighting District.

"This is the best medicine to take on bureaucracy and excessive, wasteful duplicative government that we've had in a long, long time," Quinn said.

Under the new law, the county will be able to dissolve non-elected government agencies deemed outdated or inefficient following a full analysis and public review process.

And in the case of the unincorporated subdivision just outside Naperville, one of the trustees on the Century Hill Street Lighting District wouldn't mind being out of a job.

"As a board, we're entirely welcome to this," said Tom Cieslak, 70, who has been volunteering as an unpaid trustee since the 1980s. "What happens if I get a heart attack tomorrow and I'm one of two people that know the job?"

The district, which includes about 300 homes, levies about $15,000 in property taxes to service approximately 77 streetlights. Cieslak said that managing the district has grown increasingly burdensome.

"It's very difficult to maintain a district this small to ensure quality and to keep up with the changing levels of law in terms of ethics rules and Freedom of Information rules," he said. "There's more and more training that's being put on us. There's very little support in the community."

In addition to the Century Hill Street Lighting District, about a dozen other entities could be on the
chopping block under the new law, including fire protection, sanitary and mosquito abatement districts.

"Frequently we find there's another unit of government that could do the same thing," said DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin, who had pushed for the legislation. "Why don't we just figure out who is going to be the odd man out?"

The narrowly written law currently applies only to DuPage County, which has more than 400 taxing bodies. State officials say they hope DuPage will serve as a model for other counties.

"I believe this has changed the conversation in Springfield, and I think it's the first step and you're going to see a lot more of this going on in the entire state," said Rep. Deb Conroy, D-Villa Park, one of the sponsors of the new law.

Rae Ann McNeilly, executive director of Taxpayers United of America, said she supports the concept of shrinking government, but questions the "top-down method" being employed in DuPage.

"You have county bureaucrats telling the local bureaucrats what they need and don't need," she said. "But at first blush, any time we can shrink government, it's a good thing as long as it doesn't negatively impact the governed. They should have the say in what occurs — it's their tax dollars."

Cronin said his office will analyze each entity individually to determine whether there is the potential to save money and come up with a plan for how those services would still be provided. Residents would be able to weigh in during public hearings and could put together a referendum to fight a proposed dissolution.

Cronin acknowledged consolidation could mean the loss of jobs for some.

"This is not going to be all sunshine and rainbows," he said. "This is about realizing tangible, measurable cost savings, and as anybody knows in operation of government, personnel is the No. 1 cost."

Amy Kovacevic, 38, a trustee on the Downers Grove Sanitary District — a position that pays $6,000 a year — said she believes her agency is run efficiently, but believes the county could consolidate other nonessential or outdated governmental bodies.

"As a state, as a county, there are probably ways we can trim," she said. "Many people are working paycheck to paycheck to pay their bills ... and we owe it to the taxpayers."

Ronald G. Berquist, 83, has served on the Glenbard Fire Protection District board for the past 12 years and has seen the district slowly shrink as the village of Lombard annexes homes and businesses.

Currently, the district levies taxes from about 700 homes and businesses in the unincorporated area near Lombard.

"It's a paper district," Berquist said. "We only levy the taxes and we contract our fire and EMS services from Lombard. So a point could be made that there is no point to what we do, but we continue under the statute. We think we perform a duty to the citizens of our district, but if they (county officials) choose to eliminate us, then they would have to take on the responsibility of levying the taxes."

Berquist and two other board members each are paid $1,000 a year for their service and their duties

include approving a budget and tax levy at an annual meeting and hearing complaints from citizens, although Berquist said none has shown up to meetings in recent years.

He said that given the modest expenses the district incurs, it's unlikely that eliminating the district would save taxpayers any money. And he enjoys the opportunity to work in his community.

"My wife says, 'Aren't you too old to do this, why don't you retire?' I say, 'I enjoy doing this.' If they chose to eliminate my job, so be it. But I'm willing to serve as long as the structure exists."

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Our View: Small law that could have big effect

During every session of the Illinois General Assembly, a few major bills draw most of the attention of lawmakers and the news media, but some minor ones, good and bad, manage to get approved with little notice.

One such bill that passed during the spring session addresses an important issue, though with very limited scope, and holds promise of leading to an

The law empowers DuPage County to remove non-elected, local government units more easily — by a vote of the county board rather than having to hold a referendum or go through an elaborate legal process. County board chairman Dan Cronin pushed for the bill, volunteering DuPage County as a test case in the nascent statewide campaign to get rid of unneeded taxing districts and save taxpayers money.

The law applies only to DuPage County but could serve as a model for others if it's successful. We hope it is because DuPage sure isn't the only county in Illinois that could benefit from such changes. As we've mentioned before, the Deadbeat State has more than 7,000 units of government, far more than any other state, and many are outdated and necessary, resulting in duplicative service and wasted money.

Cronin is initially targeting 13 of DuPage County's more than 400 taxing districts for elimination, ones where he appoints their boards and commissions. Under the law, the county board must prepare a plan that shows the cost savings and how a dissolved unit's service would be assumed by another government. The board also must hold a public hearing on the plan, and opponents can seek a referendum on the idea.

Gov. Pat Quinn, an advocate of government consolidation, described the new law as "landmark legislation" that he hopes will "convince other counties that this is the way to go." It's our wish that the law is followed by strong recommendations from the state's Local Government Consolidation Commission, which has been studying the issue since fall 2011 and is to make its final report by Sept. 30.

Removing unnecessary tax districts won't do much to resolve Illinois' massive financial problems but could improve government efficiency and lower property tax bills. That's reason enough for us.

Johnna Kelly
Public Information Specialist
Two Wheaton government agencies could be cut due to county reform bill

By NATHAN LURZ - nlurz@shawmedia.com

WHEATON — When Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn signed a government reform law granting DuPage County the authority to dissolve certain appointed county programs Aug. 2, two Wheaton agencies were put on the short list of potential cuts.

The Wheaton Sanitary District and Wheaton Mosquito Abatement District are among the more than 20 programs that may be considered for closure. These include several other sanitary, mosquito abatement and fire protection districts in the county, as well as county agencies such as the Board of Health, Airport Authority, Housing Authority and the Election Commission.

County Board Chairman Dan Cronin called the bill "an opportunity to carefully examine the three units of local government and come up with a plan for consolidation" at the signatures deadline.

All shortlisted agencies were identified as potentially outdated, overlapping or inefficient. Up to 13 of those agencies could be cut in an attempt to streamline the nearly $300 million in county money used to fund appointed agencies, according to a DuPage County Board news release. The potentially dissolved agencies would first be subject to a six-month public review process and audit and could be saved by a broad referendum, the release stated.

County Board Member Grant Eckhoff of Wheaton said that the board has close to naming anything to be cut yet.

"I think everything is out there to take a look at. And we have been pushing for the consolidation of fire districts in the county for a long time now, but don't think everyone has any initial meetings."

Eckhoff said the eventual goal was to have combined districts for agencies such as sanitation and mosquito abatement and that the bill was a step in that direction.

"Consolidation is the wave of the future, and the whole idea is we're going to get ahead of the curve and be more efficient during the recent push for efficiency."

Comments

There have been no comments made about this story.

View Add
Our view: Reduce number of governmental units

By The Northwest Herald Editorial Board
Created: Wednesday, August 21, 2013 5:30 a.m. CDT

When it comes to layers of government, nobody can touch Illinois.

The Land of Lincoln has more than 7,000 units of government. Everything from county boards to township assessors to cemetery districts to mosquito abatement districts. The list is as long as the number of vendors to whom the state owes money.

Illinois has 1,298 municipal governments, and 3,232 nonschool special districts, according to census data. Pennsylvania — the state second to Illinois — has 4,800 units of government. It better start creating useless levels of government quickly if it wants to catch Illinois.

Unless, of course, Illinois did something to fail back toward Pennsylvania by eliminating or consolidating units of government.

Along those lines, the state took a baby step toward less government earlier this month, when Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn signed Senate Bill 494 into law. It authorized the DuPage County Board to eliminate 13 units of government that meet a strict set of criteria.

What's the criteria? The board can vote to eliminate a taxing body for which it appoints a majority of its trustees, provided its boundaries are completely within the county, and it is not a fire district with full-time employees or a body created under the Water Commission Act of 1985. It also must cite a reason for elimination based on unnecessary or duplicate services, and voters can petition the county clerk to force the elimination to a referendum.

If applied to McHenry County, the law could be used to eliminate four of the 140 or so units of government in McHenry County. That's a policy 3 percent. Maybe we need less stringent criteria.

The Lake in the Hills Sanitary District, the Crystal Lake Rural Fire District and the Greenwood and Hebron drainage districts would be subject to elimination if SB 494 were allowed here. The drainage districts do not levy a tax.


We hope SB 494 is just the start, and that the commission offers substantial and meaningful ways to eliminate needless levels of government in Illinois.
DUPAGE COUNTY

NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release
October 15, 2013

DuPage Election Commission Saves Taxpayers $1 million Through Consolidation Efforts

Wheaton, IL – The DuPage County Election Commission recently approved a plan to save taxpayers more than $1 million through the consolidation of polling places.

Since launching the DuPage ACT Initiative (Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency), the Election Commission has adopted the County’s procurement and ethics policies in addition to becoming more financially prudent.

“I commend the Election Commission board members and staff for continuing to find ways to be more cost effective. Since the introduction of early and no-excuse absentee voting, voting patterns have changed drastically. Voters now have the ability to take part in the democratic process when it is more convenient for them. This change prompted the Election Commission to take a closer look at the polling places and identify ways to save money without affecting the voter experience,” said Cronin.

The Election Commission will reduce the number of polling places by 71. Currently there are 333 polling places serving an average of 1,705 voters per site. The new plan calls for 262 polling places with an average of 2,187 voters per site.

Election Commission Chairwoman Cathy Ficker-Terrill said voters will find an overall improvement in their Election Day voting experience.

“The polling place consolidation is another step in the process to enhance the voting experience. The board has made it a priority to consolidate 100 polling places throughout the past five years and those remaining are the best of the best. I am confident that voters will be pleased with these polling places that provide more parking and easier access into the building,” said Terrill.

Throughout the next four years, the consolidation plan will save $1,083,500 through a reduction of:

• Election Day staffing, saving $400,000;
• Warehouse space (storage of election equipment), saving $350,000;
• Precinct kits, saving $80,000;
• Polling place insurance, saving $38,500;
• Programming, testing and maintenance of voting equipment, saving $115,000; and
• Transporting election equipment to and from polling places, saving $100,000.

Since the launch of the DuPage ACT Initiative, the Election Commission has already saved taxpayers more than $600,000 on shared services initiatives with the County through shifting their website to the County's system, consolidating IT personnel and changing the cellphone policy.

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Bloomberg

Reagan Revolution Misses Tax Fiefdoms Flourishing in U.S.

By Tim Jones and John McCormick - Oct 28, 2013

Nothing thrives in Illinois like local government -- almost 7,000 units that tax, spend and drive up debt in a state struggling to pay off vendors and cover almost $100 billion of unfunded pension liabilities.

More than any other state, Illinois illustrates how local taxing bodies flourish across the U.S., whether urban or rural, Republican or Democrat. The governments duplicate services and burn tax dollars at the same time states slash money for education and Washington cuts discretionary spending.

In Illinois, which has the 11th highest state and local tax burden in the U.S., overlapping government agencies managing everything from mosquito abatement to fire protection collect billions of dollars, employ tens of thousands and consume resources that could help pay pension deficits and $7.5 billion in outstanding government bills.

“The big focus is on Washington D.C. and deficits and tax increases,” said Dan Cronin, chairman of the DuPage County board in the longtime Republican stronghold west of Chicago. “But people frequently overlook a significant chunk represented by under-the-radar government -- quiet, sleepy, unaccountable.”

Across the country, there are 38,266 special purpose districts, or government units distinct from cities, counties and schools, each with its own ability to raise money. Since President Ronald Reagan declared in his 1981 inaugural address that government “is not the solution to our problem -- government is the problem,” their numbers have jumped 32 percent.

Schools Decline

The increase stands in sharp contrast to another area of local government: public-school districts that often levy their own taxes. Their numbers dropped 13 percent in the period, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Much of that decline occurred in rural counties hit by decades of depopulation.

The government bodies include a mosquito abatement district in suburban Chicago that spends three-quarters of its budget on pay and benefits -- and more on pensions than insecticide. The districts have been around since the 1920s, when they were created to fight malaria. They have resisted recent efforts to consolidate as state officials have called them a waste of taxpayer money.
Even when they are needed -- Illinois had the most cases of the mosquito-borne West Nile virus in a decade last year -- they can be ineffective. Jim Sexton, the mayor of Evergreen Park, contracted West Nile and was hospitalized for six weeks, although four entities spend money to combat the disease in his village alone.

‘Less is More’

“Less is more,” said Sexton, who lost 65 pounds and suffers lingering nerve damage. “If you didn’t have three or four different government agencies involved in coordinating something you certainly would be able to eliminate some of the pay that’s being given and you could probably put more toward the effort.”

The tangle of local government adds hundreds of millions of dollars to tax bills in Illinois and tens of billions nationally, money that could be returned to taxpayers if their number could be reduced, said Jack Franks, a Democratic state representative who chairs an Illinois legislative committee formed to consider local-government mergers.

Their presence defies political stereotype. The top five states in terms of most local governments per resident, including the Dakotas and Kansas, all reliably vote for Republican presidential candidates.

The year after Reagan’s inaugural swipe at the public sector, the census counted 81,780 units of local government, including school districts. Last year there were 90,056. Illinois, the fifth-most-populous state, has by far the most. Texas ranks second, Pennsylvania third and then California. Those four alone have more than 10,000 special districts.

‘Imperfect Union’

In the past half century, a new government was created in the U.S. every 18 hours, said Christopher Berry, an associate professor of public policy at the University of Chicago who wrote “Imperfect Union: Representation and Taxation in Multilevel Governments.”

“Any one of these looked at in isolation doesn’t look like a problem -- but when you have so many thousands of them, that adds up to really consequential numbers,” Berry said. “People don’t think about special districts as a place to cut because most people don’t even know they exist. The persistence of them speaks to their invisibility.”

In Illinois there is plenty of material to work with -- 102 counties, almost 1,300 municipalities, about 1,400 townships and 900 school districts, along with the more than 3,200 special districts.

Growing Collections

Special purpose districts in Illinois took in $2.9 billion in 2011, up 32 percent from 1999, according to state records. That growth is eight times the increase in the state’s population. That figure doesn’t include four large Chicago-based agencies such as its transit authority.
As the number of special districts and their budgets has grown, federal spending dropped in the past two years, adjusted for inflation and excluding entitlement obligations such as Social Security and Medicare, according to U.S. Commerce Department data. Combined state and local spending rose from 2006 through 2009 before turning down over the past three years in the aftermath of the biggest economic downturn since the Great Depression, except for state-funded entitlements such as Medicaid.

State and local levies, including the property taxes that support schools, consume 9.9 percent of the average American’s income, compared with 10.2 percent in Illinois, according to the Washington-based Tax Foundation, a nonprofit that favors a simpler tax system. American households pay 17.8 percent of their income, on average, to the federal government, according to the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center in Washington.

**Highest Taxes**

Joining Illinois among states with the highest tax burdens are New York, Pennsylvania and California, which also rank among the top 10 for units of local government.

The taxing districts -- parks, libraries, fire protection and others -- make their presence known in the small print on tax bills, through property and other assessments. Residents in the Cook County suburb of Roselle alone pay into 14 separate districts.

Small-government activists such as the Tea Party concentrate on cutting federal and state spending. Cronin, a Republican running the second most-populous county in Illinois, said he’s puzzled by their inattention to the growth of local government, calling it “an astonishing inconsistency.”

**Financial Footprint**

The broadening financial footprint of special districts comes as Illinois struggles to maintain solvency and has the lowest credit rating among U.S. states. The five major public employee pension systems have a combined unfunded liability of $97 billion as of June 30, 2012, according to the Civic Federation.

Many special purpose districts share a common trait -- maintaining cash balances that are twice what they spent, on average, in 2011, according to state records of districts with less than $850,000 in revenue.

In Waterloo, Illinois, on the southern edge of metropolitan St. Louis, the local cemetery district spent $57,000 to tend the burial grounds in 2011, while its bank balance sat at $775,000.

Dan Kennedy, who manages the Waterloo Cemetery District, said he doesn’t know where the money came from. “It was there when I got here 10 years ago,” Kennedy said, adding that the funds could be used to purchase land to expand the grounds. When asked if the district has plans to do so, Kennedy said no.
Public Trust

While the fund balance includes some private donations, civic watchdogs say the amounts are indefensible.

“There is no justification for any local government to be levying property taxes when they have fund balances in excess of one year’s expenditures,” said Laurence Msall, president of the Civic Federation, a Chicago-based nonprofit that tracks state and municipal finances. “It’s a violation of the public’s trust.”

In Cook County, with 5.2 million people including Chicago, there are at least 205 special purpose districts, according to the Illinois comptroller. Four of them have been battling mosquitoes for more than a half-century -- and fending off allegations that they’re ineffective and waste money.

Consider the fight against mosquitoes in Evergreen Park. It involves government entities spreading larvicide in parks, ponds and golf courses, removing standing water from old tires and contracting with a private company to spray, when necessary. Just one of those agencies, the South Cook County Mosquito Abatement District, gets $8.84 annually from each of Evergreen Park’s 6,900 households, said Sexton, the mayor, who is still undergoing physical therapy from his bout with West Nile.

Mayor’s Death

Sexton, 61, was fortunate. The mayor of west suburban Lombard, William Mueller, died from the disease last year -- even though various local governments in his home county of DuPage had signed more than three dozen contracts for a local company to provide various levels of spraying service. All told, the Chicago region has 11 mosquito abatement districts.

Critics question both their effectiveness and their necessity.

“Mosquito season lasts four to five months a year,” said state House Republican Leader Jim Durkin, who wonders what employees do during the remaining seven-to-eight months.

“Yes, there needs to be control and abatement, but do you need to have a tax-funded district to address the problem?” said Durkin, the sponsor of a bill to do away with the four districts in Cook and put their functions under the control of the county health department.

Fighting Malaria

It’s a familiar debate involving districts that were created in the 1920s to fight malaria. Twenty-one dot the state in 12 counties. The Civic Federation wrote in a 2005 report that mosquito abatement districts “are one of the best examples of unnecessary special district government.”
The South Cook County Mosquito Abatement District, which began operating in 1955, spent $2.3 million last year serving 52 municipalities, with about $1.8 million on salaries, insurance, Social Security. About $261,000 went to pension costs, about $100,000 more than was devoted to the purchase of pesticides, according to public records.

“"It’s patronage 101," said Durkin.

The district’s manager defended its services and expertise. “I don’t know that the county health department is equipped to do the work that we do,” said Douglas Wright.

**Political Endurance**

The endurance of special purpose districts is a tribute to the politics of public-sector budgeting and the desire to evade spending limits. The 1870 Illinois Constitution included rigid expenditure restrictions on local governments, prompting the state legislature to authorize the creation of special purpose districts, starting with sanitary districts in 1907.

Then came fire protection and mosquito abatement in 1927; soil-and-water conservation and tuberculosis sanitary districts in 1937; public water in 1945; parks in 1951; cemeteries in 1957 and roads two years later. That was only the beginning.

Delegates to the 1970 constitutional convention sought to stem the growth by lifting tax limitations on municipalities and counties. Yet legislators continued to create more, including forest preserves, libraries, roads, museums, civic centers, and rescue squads.

To their supporters, the taxing districts make good political sense as they don’t have to compete with police departments and others in annual budget battles in municipalities and counties. They’re well protected in Springfield, the state capital, through lobbying associations representing them.

**Oversight Need**

That’s all the more reason they need greater oversight and consolidation, said Msall of the Civic Federation.

“It is bewildering to people in Illinois who look at this situation and say, ‘How can we not consolidate our local governments when we have more than twice the number of local governments of any state in the country and have a difficult time paying for our most basic services?’ ” Msall said.

They’re also often hidden from public view. Some don’t have their own websites. They schedule their meetings at the same time as county or village board sessions. Others resist inquiries for information, even from elected officials.
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‘Little Empires’

Cronin, 53, sought oversight authority after two state representatives requested financial records from the Highland Hills Sanitary District in Lombard: They were told to file a freedom of information act request.

An 18-year veteran of the legislature, Cronin went to the state capital to get authority to obtain information and impose more control over what he calls “all these little empires.”

“These are nice little opportunities to take care of friends and relatives,” he said, “a nice thing to hand out to people.”

Cronin hired a private accounting firm to examine sanitary, fire protection, street lighting and mosquito abatement districts, as well as other independent boards and commissions involving 900 jobs and $300 million in annual revenue. They are a sliver of the 400 taxing units in the county of 928,000 people.

Among those examined was the Wheaton Sanitary District, which handles waste water for 62,000 people. Its chief executive was paid $146,000 in 2012, more than the state’s lieutenant governor, treasurer or comptroller.

Turf Battle

His effort to rein in the taxing bodies comes as their outstanding debt levels rise. Park district debt in 2012, for instance, jumped 143 percent to $383 million in 10 years.

Cronin realized that pushing to roll back a broad array of taxing bodies would almost guarantee defeat because the opposition is rooted in the protection of “turf, people, relationships and bread on the table.”

“Our strategy is to be incremental,” Cronin said in his office in suburban Wheaton, holding out his thumb and index finger, with a tiny space between the two.

In Springfield he was forced to trim even those modest ambitions. He didn’t get expanded authority of fire protection districts. Similarly, Durkin said his bill abolishing mosquito control districts in Cook County is dead in committee.

Then there’s the Civic Federation’s call to abolish the 18 sanitary districts in Cook County that serve a total of 205,000 customers. That recommendation came 10 years ago. Each is still operating.
Illinois embodies national trend with big local government

By Tim Jones and John McCormick, Bloomberg News

Bloomberg

11:20 PM CDT, October 28, 2013

CHICAGO — Nothing thrives in Illinois like local government — almost 7,000 units that tax, spend and drive up debt in a state struggling to pay off vendors and cover almost $100 billion of unfunded pension liabilities.

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"The big focus is on Washington D.C. and deficits and tax increases," said Dan Cronin, chairman of the DuPage County board in the longtime Republican stronghold west of Chicago. "But people frequently overlook a significant chunk represented by under-the-radar government — quiet, sleepy, unaccountable."

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The increase stands in sharp contrast to another area of local government: public-school districts that often levy their own taxes. Their numbers dropped 13 percent in the period, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Much of that decline occurred in rural counties hit by decades of depopulation.

The government bodies include a mosquito abatement district in suburban Chicago that spends three-quarters of its budget on pay and benefits — and more on pensions than insecticide. The districts have been around since the 1920s, when they were created to fight malaria. They have resisted recent efforts to consolidate as state officials have called them a waste of taxpayer money.

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"These are nice little opportunities to take care of friends and relatives," he said, "a nice thing to hand out to people."

Cronin hired a private accounting firm to examine sanitary, fire protection, street lighting and mosquito abatement districts, as well as other independent boards and commissions involving 900 jobs and $300 million in annual revenue. They are a sliver of the 400 taxing units in the county of 928,000 people.

Among those examined was the Wheaton Sanitary District, which handles waste water for 62,000 people. Its chief executive was paid $146,000 in 2012, more than the state's lieutenant governor, treasurer or comptroller.

His effort to rein in the taxing bodies comes as their outstanding debt levels rise. Park district debt in 2012, for instance, jumped 143 percent to $383 million in 10 years.

Cronin realized that pushing to roll back a broad array of taxing bodies would almost guarantee defeat because the opposition is rooted in the protection of "turf, people, relationships and bread on the table."

"Our strategy is to be incremental," Cronin said in his office in suburban Wheaton, holding out his thumb and index finger, with a tiny space between the two.

In Springfield he was forced to trim even those modest ambitions. He didn't get expanded authority of fire protection districts. Similarly, Durkin said his bill abolishing mosquito control districts in Cook County is dead in committee.

Then there's the Civic Federation's call to abolish the 18 sanitary districts in Cook County that serve a total of 205,000 customers. That recommendation came 10 years ago. Each is still operating.
DuPage group to review consolidation options
Nearly 40 years after election oversight was stripped from the DuPage County clerk's office to create the DuPage Election Commission, county officials are exploring whether certain functions of both offices could be consolidated to increase efficiency and reduce costs.

Election commission officials have adopted a series of cost-saving measures since county board Chairman Dan Cronin launched the DuPage ACT (Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency) Initiative in May 2012. The initiative called on the commission and 23 other agencies to make structural and operational reforms.

"We've implemented a lot of reforms and streamlined the way we do business in that office," Cronin said on Friday.

The commission, for example, has shifted its website to the county's system, sought bids for several contracts and reduced the total number of polling places countywide from 333 to 262. Those and other changes are projected to save taxpayers up to $2.8 million over the next four years.

Still, Cronin says he wants to take "an even closer look" at the administrative functions of the commission and the clerk's office "to see what additional opportunities we can pursue."

So he has formed a "working group" that will explore the issue. Cronin will serve on the group along with County Clerk Gary King and Cathy Ficker Terrill, chairwoman of the DuPage Election Commission Board.

The working group is scheduled to have its first meeting next month.

One idea the group will consider is whether the county clerk, who is elected countywide, should run the day-to-day operations of the election commission.

"I am interested in exploring whether the clerk's office can take on some of the administration responsibilities of the election commission," Cronin said.

The working group also will examine whether staff at the commission and the clerk's office should be cross-trained. Then they could do work for both offices.

When asked if DuPage could merge the election commission with the county clerk's office, Cronin said it's a scenario the working group will examine.

"Everything is on the table," he said.
No matter what changes are made, Cronin said he still wants the bipartisan election commission board to continue to oversee the election process in DuPage.

"It is a hallmark of our system out here," he said. "It's important to make sure that both Democrats and Republicans alike feel that the administration of elections is fair and efficient."

Under state law, both political parties must be represented on the three-person election commission board, but Republicans currently hold two of the three seats in DuPage.
DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin, left, says there are several issues DuPage expects to tackle in 2014, including the debate over how much money from sales taxes the suburbs should receive for public transit.

Scott Sanders | Staff Photographer
Eliminating unnecessary units of local government, finding a cost-effective way to battle mosquitoes and seeking more money for public transit are some of the key issues DuPage County officials expect to face in 2014.

County board Chairman Dan Cronin recently sat down with the Daily Herald to share his thoughts about the coming year, which will be the fourth of his administration.

The Elmhurst Republican, who is seeking re-election, said his top priority is to “take the next step” with his DuPage ACT (Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency) Initiative.

The initiative, which was launched in 2012, called on 24 local governmental entities to make structural and operational reforms. Now, thanks to a state law approved last year, DuPage has the authority to eliminate as many as 13 of those agencies, including fire protection, sanitary and mosquito abatement districts.

"We have the tools," Cronin said. "Now we have to show results. We have to show how we can save money and enhance services."

The first taxing body DuPage is poised to ax is the Fairview Fire Protection District, which covers an unincorporated area near Downers Grove. As a so-called "paper" district, Fairview collects property taxes from the owners of 187 parcels and uses the money to pay Downers Grove to provide emergency response and fire services.

Instead of continuing that arrangement, Downers Grove has formed a special service area where Fairview residents will pay the village directly for the services they receive. That will allow DuPage to disband the fire protection district in early 2014. The move is expected to result in a one-time savings of $100,000 for Fairview taxpayers.

While the county will work to dissolve some units of government, Cronin stressed an agency doesn’t need to be eliminated to save taxpayers money. "There are going to be examples where we realize cost savings and efficiencies through new structure, joint purchasing and streamlining of processes," he said.

One area where there could be a potential savings is mosquito control. Right now, DuPage has 45 municipalities, townships and service districts targeting the insects.

Last year, a mosquito abatement task force advised officials to explore whether DuPage's nine townships should oversee all of the county's abatement efforts. But the idea faces an obstacle.

"Frankly, there are some villages that don't want to do business with the townships," Cronin said.

So officials are talking about the possibility of pursuing a countywide contract for mosquito abatement services to save money. Right now, 36 governmental entities sign separate contracts with the same company to reduce the mosquito population.

Another possible cost-savings move in 2014 could involve the DuPage County clerk's office and the DuPage Election Commission. Cronin is going to work with County Clerk Gary King and election commission Chairwoman Cathy Ficker Terrill to explore whether certain functions of both offices could be consolidated to increase efficiency and reduce costs.
"Administratively, it seems to me we can realize some savings," Cronin said. "There are employees who work for the clerk's office. There employees who work for the election commission. Why can't they be cross trained to work for both?"

Overall, Cronin said he wants DuPage to demonstrate consolidation is possible. "Hopefully, the experience we have ... could become an example that would be replicated," he said.

DuPage leaders also hope to answer some questions about the future of the county fairgrounds in Wheaton.

A real estate task force is trying to determine if the DuPage County Fair is the best use for the 42-acre site along Manchester Road. The advisory panel then will recommend whether the county, which owns the site next to the government complex, should continue leasing the fairgrounds to the DuPage County Fair Association, the nonprofit entity that organizes and runs the annual fair.

"I am committed to the fair. It's a wonderful cultural experience," Cronin said. "I just think it's my duty and obligation as a steward of the taxpayers' money to explore other uses for that property."

The fairgrounds site is being leased to the fair association at a rate of $1,375 annually as part of a deal that expires in 2020.

Cronin stressed that officials aren't looking to "just sell the land and develop it."

"It's an asset of the county," he said. "If we were to explore uses of that land, it would be a use that furthers the mission of the county."

County officials recently met with a developer who pitched the idea of providing housing for seniors on the site. At one time, a federal courthouse had been the most speculated potential development for the parcel.

When it comes to public transit, Cronin says he's continuing to push for the suburbs to get their fair share of transit dollars, which come from sales taxes.

For example, Cronin said he wasn't pleased with how the Regional Transportation Authority divvied up roughly $180 million in discretionary revenues for 2014. The Chicago Transit Authority requested and received 98 percent of the money. Pace got 2 percent. Metra received none if it.

"We've got significant public transit needs," Cronin said. "Why does our money go there (to the CTA) when we need it right here in our own back yard?"

Cronin said he's hoping "a better model" for public transit is developed when a task force commissioned by Gov. Pat Quinn recommends reforms to the General Assembly.

"It comes down to governance and funding," Cronin said. "I believe DuPage County should have a prominent seat at the table. We generate a lot of tax revenue and we have a significant population. So I'm going to be advocating that we play a larger role."
DuPage County | updated: 2/11/2014 9:24 PM

DuPage starts process to disband fire protection district

Six months after being granted the power to eliminate 13 local government entities, DuPage County is working to disband one of them.

The county board on Tuesday agreed to begin the process to dissolve the Fairview Fire Protection District, which covers an unincorporated area near Downers Grove.

"This is a momentous occasion," county board Chairman Dan Cronin said before the vote. "It's the first time this new law has been used in the state of Illinois. This is the demonstration of how you go about dissolving units of local government in a responsible and thoughtful way."

Cronin pushed for state legislation after learning how difficult it is to eliminate a taxing body. Some entities, for example, can be dissolved only with voter approval.

The new law, which the governor signed in August, gives DuPage authority to eliminate "duplicitous or inefficient county-appointed agencies," officials said.

As a so-called "paper" district, Fairview doesn't own fire equipment or have a staff. It simply collects property taxes from the owners of 187 parcels and uses the money to pay Downers Grove to provide emergency response and fire services.

Instead of continuing that arrangement, Downers Grove has formed a special service area where Fairview residents will pay the village directly for the services they receive. That allowed DuPage to disband the fire protection district.

By law, multiple steps must be completed before Fairview is formally dissolved. The process, which includes finalizing the affairs of the district and a waiting period, is expected to take at least five months.

The change is expected to result in a one-time savings of more than $100,000 total for Fairview taxpayers. That's the amount of money the district owed Downers Grove for unpaid services.

In addition to eliminating the more than $100,000 debt, dissolving Fairview "ensures sustainable fire suppression for years to come," Cronin said.

"People say it's just one (taxing district)," he said. "But if 102 counties across the state of Illinois all were able to eliminate one, that's a significant chunk. We're doing our part. We want to be a model."

Cronin said he expects the county board to act to disband several of those entities. "We've got a handful of them that we think we could bring to the board within the next year or so," he said.
DuPage County cuts government with consolidation

DuPage County is downsizing, and the rest of Illinois is watching.

In the past three years DuPage has saved about $80 million while consolidating and cutting government, according to county officials.

DuPage's focus centers on consolidating and transforming redundant agencies that perform many of the same tasks, including: mosquito abatement, treating and collecting sewage, maintaining street lights, firefighting, even hosting the annual county fair.

About 20 miles west of Chicago, DuPage County is the largest regional government in Illinois to make government consolidation a top priority. It hopes to be a model for Illinois but the county's efforts show that there is no cookie-cutter approach.

"To dial back and dissolve these creatures that were established is very, very challenging," said Daniel J. Cronin, county board chairman and a driving force behind the government consolidation effort.

Upon taking office in 2010, Cronin — a longtime state senator — found himself essentially accountable for scores of government agencies whose boards were appointed by the county, yet he had little or no power to oversee these units' operations or even obtain basic information about their finances and procedures.

Cronin worked with legislators including Sen. Tom Cullerton, a Democrat and cousin to Senate President John Cullerton, to pass bills giving the county more power over the government agencies whose boards they appoint.

Last August, Gov. Pat Quinn signed into law SB 494, which gives the DuPage board the power to dissolve or consolidate 13 different government units, including four sanitary districts, three "paper fire districts" that have no staff or equipment, the airport authority, county fair authority, housing authority, two mosquito abatement districts and a small agency responsible for street lights.

The bill originally covered 24 nonelected government units, which represented about $300 million in annual costs and employed about 900 people. In the final version, fire districts that provide actual services and public agencies with territory outside DuPage were taken out of the bill.

Getting started

Among the headaches Cronin faced when he took office as chairman were a housing authority that was charged with mispending $5 million in federal money, and a water commission that had rapidly depleted $70 million in reserves through apparent mismanagement.

When he tried to delve into the finances of these and other units, Cronin was stymied. "These agencies operated under the radar -- there really was no connection to the voters and the taxpayers," he said. "I really felt a need to immerse myself in this and find out first and foremost what the heck is going on out there."

Cronin worked with Cullerton and other legislators to pass SB 541 in 2011. The law mandates that bodies with a majority of board members appointed by the county must turn over documents to the county and reveal certain information to the board. (Like SB 494, it was written to apply only to DuPage).

This law was heralded as a boon for transparency. It resulted in "reams of documents, boxes of stuff being dropped off" at Cronin's office.

The county hired consultants Crowe Horwath to analyze the operations of and make recommendations regarding 24 government agencies with boards appointed by the county board chairman.

The Crowe Horwath report, released in May 2012, has been the playbook for DuPage's efforts. Though no agencies have yet been dissolved or consolidated, Cronin said the initiative has already saved taxpayers through measures including rebidding contracts, shared services agreements and eliminating 50 full-time staff positions.

A statewide model?

At nearly 7,000 Illinois has the most separate government agencies of any state, and DuPage County lays claim to more than 400.

Cronin said he's fielded numerous requests for advice from officials at other counties, townships, fire departments and towns who are inspired by DuPage's efforts.

Last November, state senators from Lake, Kane and McHenry counties introduced legislation that would give county boards and county executives the power to remove appointed officials from office.

Cullerton said he'd like to see DuPage examine and possibly consolidate 10 to 13 government units under SB 494.

"Then after we get some results this year, next year we propose every county does eight to 10 units themselves," he said. "Within two to three years, we've reduced units of taxing government by about 1,000" statewide.
DuPage County cuts government with consolidation - Gate House

But bills facilitating consolidation are likely to continue facing suspicion and opposition, as many see consolidation as a threat to paid appointments, microcosms of power, jobs, services or sources of revenues via tax levies.

"Downstate people rely more on small units of government, and people are worried (consolidation) will affect them," said state Rep. Deborah Conroy, a Democrat from DuPage and a cosponsor of SB 494. "It's not a one-size-fits-all approach."

http://www.rrstar.com/article/2014/03/09/OPINION/140309290
DuPage County wins award for reform efforts
DuPage County's push to reform and consolidate local government has earned national recognition.

The National Association of Counties has given an Achievement Award to DuPage for its ACT (Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency) Initiative. The award means NACo has deemed the initiative to be a county government program that's innovative and enhances services for residents, officials said.

"Any time some outside, credible organization recognizes what we're doing in DuPage County as something virtuous, I'm pleased," DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin said. "I'm honored. But we still have a lot of work to do."

The initiative, launched in 2012, called on 24 local governmental entities to make structural and operational reforms. Now, thanks to a state law approved last year, DuPage has the power to eliminate some of those agencies, including fire protection, sanitary and mosquito abatement districts.

Using its newfound authority, the county is disbanding the Fairview Fire Protection District, which covers an unincorporated area near Downers Grove. Meanwhile, a new study will help officials determine whether two sanitary districts -- Highland Hills and Salt Creek -- should continue operating as stand-alone entities.

Cronin said the county's efforts are projected to save taxpayers $80 million and "provide a template for a smaller, more responsive government."

NACo President Linda Langston said in a statement that the association applauds county governments that are finding new and better ways to serve their constituents.

"The Achievement Awards recognize counties' outstanding efforts to be more effective and more responsive to the diverse needs of communities across the country," she said.

Nationally, NACo awards are given in 21 different categories, including children and youth, criminal justice, county administration, environmental protection and health.
Pursuing more opportunities for consolidation, finding the best use for the county fairgrounds and fighting mosquitoes on a countywide level are some of the top issues DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin wants to address in the new year.

Cronin sat down with the Daily Herald to talk about his plans for 2015, which will be the fifth year of his administration.
The Elmhurst Republican, who won a second 4-year term in November, says he remains focused on his DuPage ACT (Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency) Initiative.

"The accountability, consolidation and transparency (policy) has sort of become our brand name," Cronin said. "We try to look at everything within that framework."

The initiative, launched in 2012, initially called on 24 local governmental entities to make structural and operational reforms. Thanks to a change in state law in 2013, the ACT initiative could result in the elimination of as many as 13 of those agencies, including fire protection, sanitary and mosquito abatement districts.

In 2014, the county disbanded the Fairview Fire Protection District, which was an on-paper district that covered an unincorporated area near Downers Grove.

The next targets for consolidation could be the Highland Hills and Salt Creek sanitary districts.

Christopher B. Burke Engineering was hired by the county to do an assessment of the two sanitary districts, which serve residents in Lombard and Villa Park. The findings are expected to be released by the end of February.

Cronin said the report will help county officials determine if the sanitary districts should continue operating as stand-alone entities.

He already knows Highland Hills and Salt Creek have aging infrastructure, Cronin said. In addition, Salt Creek has some debt.

Still, if consolidation is the route officials decide to take, Cronin said it could be possible to structure a deal where the county would take control of Highland Hills, and Salt Creek would be absorbed by Villa Park.

That, however, would involve selling Villa Park on the idea.

"When I was in the legislature, they (Villa Park officials) used to talk about how it's unfair that we have a separate entity," he said. "Now when we ask if they're interested in taking it on ... they're not as enthusiastic about it because the preliminary indication is that there's some debt there."

Despite the success in disbanding the Fairview Fire Protection District, Cronin said there are obstacles preventing more firefighting agencies from consolidating.

Fire departments and fire protection districts have talked about the possibility of coordinating services. But consolidation could save taxpayers money because merging agencies would reduce their equipment and administrative costs.

The problem is that it's not easy to sell fire chiefs on the idea of merging their department or protection district with another agency. So Cronin is planning to reach out to mayors for help.

"You can only ask a fire chief to go so far," he said. "I believe the DuPage Mayors and Managers Conference is very interested in this. I want to work with them."
Cronin said consolidation involves a lot of "detailed" work that is time consuming, but there's no other way to do it.

"It's going to become more and more difficult as we go down the road," he said. "But it's more and more important as we go down the road.

"So taking it to this next level is really something I am committed to," Cronin said. "But I also recognize that it will probably be one of the hardest things I've ever done in this business."

Cronin also hopes to implement a countywide strategy to battle mosquitoes.

Right now, DuPage has dozens of municipalities, townships and service districts targeting the insects.

A mosquito abatement task force has advised officials to explore whether DuPage's nine townships should oversee all of the county's abatement efforts. But that idea would require the forest preserve district to become involved.

The forest preserve district, which owns about 12 percent of all the land in DuPage, doesn't spray insecticides to kill adult mosquitoes because those products could kill other insects and have a detrimental effect on ecosystems.

However, federal guidelines for public safety and public health call for mosquito abatement to be done over a wide area, Cronin said.

"Having multiple different standards in a patchwork of communities is not the best way to abate mosquitoes," Cronin said. "It's not in the best interest of public health.

"If the CDC and the public health experts recommend a certain approach to abatement," he said, "I think we should embrace that approach."

Therefore, he said, the county will work with the forest preserve to try to implement "corner-to-corner coverage."

"There's a lot of people who have opinions about this, but there is no doubt there is a standard," he said. "We're working toward that. It is my hope and my expectation that the forest preserve will work toward that as well."

In the coming months, DuPage officials also hope to answer questions about the future of the county fairgrounds in Wheaton.

A real estate task force was given the job of trying to determine if the DuPage County Fair is the best use for the 42-acre site along Manchester Road.

The advisory panel's recommendations are expected to be released during the first part of the year. "It will be a menu of different options and observations for us to consider," Cronin said.

One issue county board members are expected to decide is whether DuPage, which owns the fairgrounds site next to the government complex, should continue leasing the fairgrounds to the DuPage County Fair Association, the nonprofit entity that organizes and runs the annual fair.
The fairgrounds site is being leased to the fair association at a rate of $1,375 annually as part of a deal that expires in 2020.

Cronin said he would like to know if there's a more compelling need for that land. He said officials aren't looking to develop it "just for the sake of developing it."

"I'm interested in recommendations that advance the mission of the county," he said. "How can this asset be utilized more effectively to help us serve the community?"
Gov. Rauner cites DuPage County's success in efforts to consolidate local government

A "zombie" sanitary district was discovered, with no apparent purpose. A defunct fire district operated almost entirely on paper, having to contract with a nearby department for services.

Those were local units of government that DuPage County officials moved to eliminate as part of an initiative they project will save taxpayers more than $100 million over the next 20 years. Advocates say it's a model for how other Illinois counties can cut costs through consolidating government too.

"It's very difficult, tedious work, but it has the potential to pay huge dividends for taxpayers," DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin said.

The initiative was heralded last week by Gov. Bruce Rauner, who reiterated the argument that Illinois has too many units of government and vowed to "empower" taxpayers and local officials to pursue such consolidation. The Republican governor made a point of inviting Cronin, a former GOP state senator from Elmhurst, to his first State of the State speech and lauding him for efforts that include shared services, employee benefit changes and other reforms.

But success is far more complicated, as those who have tried it in Illinois will attest. Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn eliminated dozens of what he termed unneeded state boards and commissions in 2013. But his 2011 plan to whittle down the state's more than 860 school districts to just 300 met with little support.

As Cronin notes, only a portion of DuPage's savings came from the elimination of government agencies. Some reductions came from consolidation of services, a state-ordered measure and budget reductions that included the firing of employees. And at least one critic questions the savings numbers and why officials haven't gone further by targeting other government units.

"We've never gotten hard-core evidence of these savings," said Liz Chaplin, a Democrat on the county board.

In his speech, Rauer noted that Illinois has more than 7,000 units of local government, more than any other state. He is asking Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti — a former city council member from Wheaton, the DuPage County seat — to work to find ways to lower the cost of running those local governments by working with officials at that level.

DuPage County's Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency Initiative was launched in spring 2012, with county officials vowing to focus on reducing waste while finding efficiencies and ways for local agencies to collaborate.

The most up-to-date initiative figures supplied by DuPage County officials show savings of about $116.4 million over the next 20 years. But much of the projected savings doesn't come directly from what could be called "consolidation" of local governments.

The largest area of projected savings — 31 percent — is $36.5 million from budget cuts made since fiscal year 2011, which included the termination of 45 employees, according to initiative figures. Cronin pushed for those reductions after his election as county board chair in 2010 after serving 20 years in Springfield.

A 2010 state measure, sponsored by Cronin when he was a senator, will repeal a DuPage County Water Commission sales tax in 2016. The repeal will result in $33 million worth of tax savings for residents — another 28 percent of the "consolidation" savings — according to initiative figures.

Cronin cautioned that government consolidation efforts won't yield immediate results. He said the challenge requires input from the community and taking a close look at services provided by districts.

In extreme cases, local governments existed entirely on paper, Cronin said.

The now-defunct Fairview Fire Protection District had a governing board but no equipment and contracted services through a neighboring fire department. The Timberlake Estates Sanitary District, dubbed a "zombie" district by Cronin and others, transferred its duties to the county in 1985, but residents were still seeing a line with zero charge on their property tax bill for years.

Chaplin, of Downers Grove, said she doesn't think getting rid of those agencies was the best way to cut costs. And she questions why officials have not gone further in some cases, for example, by examining the county's election commission, which oversees local voting instead of the county clerk, or the county's housing agency.

She said she intends to request an audit to study the initiative's savings.
In response, Cronin said details of the initiative are discussed regularly in county board meetings, especially during the annual budget process. He said departments and county officials present budgets to board members, highlighting the savings from reform.
Raunen exploring ways to consolidate local governments

DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin, left, looks on as Gov. Bruce Rauner signs an executive order creating a Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandate Task Force during a Friday news conference at the DuPage Water Commission in Elmhurst.

Bev Horne | Staff Photographer

Gov. Bruce Rauner says he wants to reduce the massive number of local government agencies in Illinois after previous consolidation efforts by state lawmakers stalled.

Rauner signed an executive order Friday creating a Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandate Task Force that will be headed by Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti of Wheaton. The panel will be
charged with finding efficiencies and encouraging streamlining of local government functions, officials said.

Illinois has nearly 7,000 separate taxing bodies, ranging from counties to townships to fire protection districts.

Rauner said Illinois has far more units of local government than any other state.

"Some of the unnecessary layers of local government are the fundamental reasons why residents of Illinois face some of the highest local government taxes in America," Rauner said during a news conference in Elmhurst. "These inefficient layers of government for the taxpayer have got to be brought down so we can help reduce this environment we have that's conducive to corruption."

Task force members will be appointed by Rauner and include state lawmakers and representatives from school districts and other local governments.

Sanguinetti said one goal of the task force will be to "free local governments from unnecessary, unfunded mandates imposed by the state."

She said the state has imposed more than 280 unfunded mandates, which has cost local taxpayers money.

After doing a cost analysis of all the unfunded mandates, the task force will recommend which ones need to be replaced, revised or repealed, Sanguinetti said.

"Every dollar we save through this process is a dollar that goes back into the pocketbooks of our taxpayers," she said.

The task force is required to submit its findings to Rauner and the General Assembly by Dec. 31, officials said. It then will be dissolved.

Rauner said the recommendations "will get the conversation started" on how to end duplicative services and improve efficiency within local government agencies.

"We need to encourage streamlining of local government and the school districts to reduce costs and be good stewards of taxpayer dollars," he said.

Some have long argued that consolidating small units of government would save tax money and improve services. Others say it's very difficult to eliminate a taxing body after it has been established.

DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin, however, said the county has shown consolidation is possible.

Cronin has been championing consolidation as a way to save money and improve services since before he took office more than four years ago.

During his first term, he launched his ACT (Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency) Initiative, which called on 24 local governmental entities to make structural and operational reforms.

"We've created partnerships, economized, simplified and streamlined," said Cronin, adding that the
DuPage Water Commission -- the location of Friday's news conference -- is one example of a once-troubled government entity becoming a success story.

Thanks to a state law approved in 2013, DuPage was able to dissolve a fire protection district and has the power to eliminate up to a dozen other units of local government.

"Sometimes the best approach is consolidation," Cronin said. "Sometimes, there are reforms you can realize that stop short of consolidation."

State Sen. Tom Cullerton, who was the chief sponsor of the 2013 legislation, said he's pleased Rauner recognizes that DuPage has been a leader in effective, efficient government.

"I passed legislation to dissolve redundant appointed positions to provide taxpayers with a smaller, less costly local government," Cullerton said.

The Villa Park Democrat added that he looks forward "to working with the governor to find ways to apply the same practices throughout Illinois."

Cronin said the creation of the task force shows Rauner is committed to the issue.

"It gives momentum to our movement, our efforts," Cronin said. "We want to take consolidation to the next level.

"With the enthusiastic support of this governor and his commitment to it with Evelyn Sanguinetti," he said, "I think it will help us get votes in the legislature for our agenda and for things we want to do. We have to keep the momentum going."
Rauner orders consolidation task force led by DuPage's Sanguinetti, Cronin (with video)

Government consolidation, DuPage style, may be coming to counties across the state.


Rauner called it an "exciting step towards turning our state around."

"We need to encourage the streamlining of local governments and of school districts to reduce costs and be good stewards of taxpayer dollars," he said. "The [task force] will get the conversation started on how to streamline [and] end duplicative services and improve efficiency."

Rauner has previously praised consolidation efforts in DuPage, most notably in his State of the State address Feb. 4.

DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin, who said he will play a leadership role in the task force, spoke at the press conference, calling DuPage a laboratory for consolidation. The county projects more than $100 million in savings from its Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency Initiative, which Cronin started in 2010.

While Cronin said the county's approach to consolidation isn't one-size-fits-all, he believes its principles could be transferred statewide.

"Imagine the savings if we could repeat that success story in 100 other counties throughout Illinois," Cronin said.

Rauner said the government contraction would have to come without compromising the important services local districts provide.

The governor's order comes just days before he will present his budget proposal to the General Assembly in the face of massive debt and revenue problems.

He said cutting spending would only play a part in his efforts to reform Illinois.
"As I've said, we need to grow our way out of our problems," he said. "We can't just cut our way out of our problems. Purely cutting alone without structural, pro-growth reform won't get us there."

Sanguinetti said the governor would appoint 15 representatives from across the state to the task force in the next month. The group will lead a study to determine which agencies and unfunded mandates to recommend the governor examine.

The task force will be required to submit its findings to the governor and the General Assembly by Dec. 31, 2015, at which time it will be dissolved, according to a news release from the governor's office.

Illinois averages nearly 54 units of local government per 100,000 residents, Sanguinetti said.

She said too many layers of local government aids corruption and heightens taxes.

Consolidation efforts will be a big part of the future of Illinois, according to Sanguinetti.

"Every dollar we save is a dollar that goes back into the pocketbooks of our taxpayers," she said.

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**Numbers to know**

Illinois is home to ...

- 6,963 local government bodies (most in country)
- 1,298 municipalities (most in country)
- 3,227 special districts (most in country)
- 1,431 townships (third-highest in country)
- 905 school and community college districts (third-highest in country)
- 102 counties (sixth-highest in country)

*Source: Governor's office*
How to select fire protection trustees on ballot

By Bob Goldsborough
Chicago Tribune

MARCH 25, 2015, 3:27 PM

Voters in Warrenville and parts of unincorporated Wheaton and Naperville will go to the polls April 7 to decide if they want to choose the three members of the Warrenville Fire Protection District board directly through elections or if they want the DuPage County Board chairman to continue to appoint them.

Warrenville's fire district serves almost the entire city, along with a swath of unincorporated areas extending from just east of the Chicago Golf Club in unincorporated Wheaton to a portion of Fermilab on the west. On the north, district boundaries extend from Mack Road to south of Interstate Highway 88 on the south. It also takes in small pieces of unincorporated Naperville, including Fairmeadow Lane, Delles Road and 39th Street west of Naperville Road, and Meadow and Sunrise Roads south of Ferry Road.

Now, DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin selects trustees, subject to that board's consent. He has been pushing the county's many fire districts to either consolidate or share services in an effort to be more efficient. The effort has been part of what Cronin calls his ACT initiative, which seeks accountability, transparency and consolidation from local governments.

Cronin asked Warrenville's fire district to join the West Suburban Fire/Rescue Alliance to share services and shorten response times. He also encouraged the district to adopt the county's ethics ordinance and sign an intergovernmental agreement subjecting it to enforcement measures.

In response, some residents connected to the fire district gathered enough signatures to place a question on whether district trustees should be chosen by voters or the county board chairman.

"This is the only unit of local government that can make residents pay property taxes, but residents can't vote for or against the people who are making the decisions," said former fire district Trustee Kate Perkins, whom Cronin appointed in early 2013 but then declined to reappoint in 2014. "That's just not right. The city governments in Warrenville and Wheaton are elected, and the park districts are elected. This decision belongs to the people who live here."

Perkins and other supporters of direct election of trustees collected more than 1,600 signatures, far
exceeding the 1,000 signatures needed to place the measure on the ballot. She disputed Cronin’s assertions about the local fire alliance.

"We’ve got a lot of forest preserve between us and other departments, like Carol Stream and West Chicago," Perkins said. "Instead, we’ve standardized our operating procedures with Naperville, which is closer to us. If Chairman Cronin doesn’t understand the issues going on in Warrenville, he’s perhaps not the best person to be appointing (trustees)."

Cronin called the ballot efforts "disturbing."

"This seems like a rather curious move on their part," he said. "This west suburban fire alliance works on shared services, and (alliance officials) actually think it could shorten response times for folks in the Warrenville Fire Protection District, as they have a few fire stations that are closer to residents. I’ve put some new people — some reform-minded people — on the board, and some of the old guard who had been there in the past during some of (the district’s) experiences with nepotism and some of the insider dealings, those folks are the ones out circulating this petition."

District Board President Bill Mennell called consolidating services "a good idea," but insisted that working with Naperville makes more sense because "we have common borders." He dismissed Cronin’s concerns about ethics, noting the district has its own ethics policy.

"We didn’t sign on with the county because the county would come in and if there were any questions, they’d come in and do the investigation, but they also wanted $150 an hour to do it, and we’re not opening our checkbook whenever the county comes in," Mennell said. "If they wanted to do it for free or at a reduced price, great."

Cronin said none of the 12 other local governments that have signed on to the county’s ethics ordinance has expressed concerns over investigation costs. He added that he believes "in democracy with a small 'd' and if folks want to take a vote on whether to elect their fire district board, that’s their prerogative."

"But, I would just ask the voters as they are casting their ballots why," he said. "Why are they doing this? With the appointed model, we were trying to move in a direction of reform and change. Do they not want to change, or do they really want to run another campaign over there, and more literature and more signs?"

Perkins noted that Warrenville is one of just three DuPage County fire districts with appointed board members, along with Lisle-Woodridge and West Chicago. The other dozen or so have their trustees elected by voters.

"The people of Warrenville deserve to have a say in the future of their fire district, and the way for them
to have that say is if they elect people who are directly accountable to them," she said.

Cronin said he has "no other agenda" other than seeing local governments with "enlightened, reform-minded people, and new people who are willing to do shared services."

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This article is related to: Warrenville, Naperville, Wheaton
DuPage County's government consolidation and improvement efforts were spotlighted at a meeting of Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti's state task force dedicated to the same effort Wednesday.

The purpose of the Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandates Task Force, which is chaired by Sanguinetti, is to identify ways to help local governments consolidate and get rid of duplicate governmental bodies, school districts and taxing entities.
The task force is also slated to figure out ways to reduce the number of state-imposed unfunded mandates.

One of the highlights of the meeting in Wheaton was DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin's presentation on the county's government consolidation efforts.

Cronin, who is a task force member, said that during his early career as chairman, he was informed that a county-appointed agency had misallocated millions of dollars in federal funds. A year earlier, he said, another county commission could not account for millions of dollars, as well.

"I got to the point where I couldn't sleep at night," Cronin said. "I didn't know what was going on out there with all these various county-appointed agencies, and I understood that the only connection between the taxpayers and the voters and the conduct of these appointed agencies was me."

In 2011, the county board undertook an evaluation of its appointed agencies, and even hired an accounting firm to complete the task.

Subsequently, in 2012, the county's Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency Initiative was launched.

"We sought to introduce best practices, improve efficiencies, reduce duplication and encourage resource sharing across county agencies and county government," Cronin said.

According to a progress report on the initiative, the county has completed several accomplishments since the initiative's inception, such as creating an online transparency portal that publicizes information regarding county-appointed agencies, and amending the county's ethics ordinance so that these agencies could adopt it.

Because of a state law approved in 2013, the county was also permitted to dissolve up to 13 county-appointed agencies.

DuPage County officials have so far dissolved a fire protection district and a sanitary district, Cronin said.

Cronin said he plans to introduce a resolution next week in Springfield that, if approved, would say legislators acknowledge that the current size, scope and cost of local government in Illinois may overburden taxpayers and have other negative consequences. It would also say they support consolidating or eliminating government agencies if appropriate.
The DuPage Water Commission has agreed to lower the price it charges towns for Lake Michigan water. The reduced rate is scheduled to take effect May 1.

Daily Herald file photo

Robert Sanchez

The cost of water is dropping for most DuPage County towns for the first time since the agency that supplies Lake Michigan water was rocked by a financial scandal more than five years ago.

The DuPage Water Commission has cut rates by about 2 percent as part of the agency's roughly $123 million budget for the fiscal year that starts May 1.
The commission provides lake water to 25 DuPage municipalities and some unincorporated parts of the county. When the rate decrease takes effect May 1, the cost the agency charges for water will drop from $4.95 per 1,000 gallons to $4.85 per 1,000 gallons.

It's not yet clear whether towns will pass along that savings to their residential customers, although the Naperville City Council was talking Tuesday night about doing exactly that.

Jim Zay, chairman of the commission, said the rate drop is the culmination of various reforms made after it was discovered in late 2009 that the commission accidentally spent its $69 million reserve fund through poor accounting practices and lackadaisical financial oversight.

"Many people didn't have a lot of confidence in the commission," Zay said. "But there was a lot of dedication from the board and staff to look at the operation and determine what we needed to do."

After the board that oversees the commission was revamped, it implemented enhanced accounting policies, procedures, controls and oversight. It also adopted a rate schedule that addressed increases from Chicago for the purchase of water and other financial issues.

In addition, the agency took steps to wean itself off the quarter-cent sales tax, which generates about $35 million of its annual revenue. State law calls for the sales tax to be eliminated on June 1, 2016.

To prepare for the loss of the tax, the agency started paying down its debt, which totaled $142 million in 2011.

That amount includes $70 million the agency borrowed in the months after the financial scandal to pay off construction debt and restore its reserves. The reserve fund had to be replenished to stabilize the commission's bond rating, which was tumbling at the time.

Zay said the commission was able to repay the $70 million it borrowed last year, which was 18 months ahead of schedule.

While the commission has about $12 million in remaining debt, that amount is scheduled to be paid in full by May 2016.

"I just think it's a remarkable turnaround," DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin said. "When you think about where they were four years ago and consider the fact that they are prepared to implement a 2 percent reduction in rates ... it's just dramatic."

"There were all sorts of problems and issues and scandals," Cronin said. "Today, they're a model agency."

Zay said part of the reason the commission was able to lower its price for water is the commission has become more efficient. "We've cut our operating budget almost $10 million in the last four years," he said.

While the commission has adopted the lower water rate for its municipal customers, it doesn't mean those towns won't increase their prices for residents.

"Hopefully, the municipalities can stay at the status quo," Zay said. "I know they have infrastructure needs. But if they're going to raise (water rates), it won't be because of the commission."
Our view: Consolidation efforts a great step forward for DuPage

Published: Wednesday, May 13, 2015 1:47 p.m. CST

In the aftermath of the Illinois Supreme Court’s expected decision to strike down the 2013 pension reform law, the state now finds itself in an even bigger fiscal hole than the one it already faced.

There’s no telling how our officials will proceed. Whether the governor and Legislature opt for raising taxes, reducing services or putting off the problem, or some combination of those options, there’s clearly going to be less money around to do the important things that government needs to do.

Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti’s task force, which looks at consolidation and unfunded mandates, is now more relevant than when it was created. The state and DuPage County can’t afford to tolerate the waste that comes from duplicated services and the overhead created by duplicated bureaucracies.

Chances are, everyone’s heard this by now, but it needs to be repeated anyway: Illinois has far more units of government than any other state in the U.S., with almost 7,000. No other state has even 5,000. That’s right – we could eliminate 2,000 governmental entities in Illinois (almost 30 percent of the state’s total) and still lead the nation.

Sanguinetti, a former Wheaton City Council member well versed in the mishmash of agencies that lord over DuPage County, stopped by West Chicago recently to talk about her task force’s effort.

“This is not the first study of its kind when it comes to units of government,” she told a gathering of the League of Women Voters of Wheaton. “Prior administrations have conducted these studies, and then nothing happens with them.”

But the push for consolidation in DuPage has already begun, and there’s cause for optimism that it might have some teeth this time. County Board Chairman Dan Cronin has talked about dissolving the DuPage Fair and Exposition Authority, which exists solely to receive and then dole out funds to the DuPage Fair Association for the annual DuPage County Fair.

In 2014, the County Board dissolved the redundant Fairview Fire Protection District and was reportedly looking to do the same to the North Westmont Fire Protection District and the Salt Creek and Highland Hills sanitary districts.

And now, state Sen. Chris Nybo, R-Elmhurst, and Democratic DuPage County Board member Liz
Chaplan are teaming up to ask Sanguinetti's task force to consider eliminating the DuPage Election Commission. In most other counties in Illinois, elections are run by the county clerk's office.

"We've merely asked at this point that the government task force look at that issue and determine whether there is a cost savings there that can enhance accountability and other efficiencies in terms of personnel," Nybo said.

Those are the kinds of questions we need to be asking all across the county and the state.

There are going to be hard financial decisions happening in Springfield that are going to painful. There's no way around it. Consolidation has the potential to create meaningful savings in a relatively painless fashion. It won't solve the budget crisis all by itself, but it's certainly a responsible place to start attacking the problem.
Cronin: Others should follow DuPage's blueprint for consolidation
DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin says the steps DuPage has taken to streamline and consolidate local government could easily be replicated across the state.

During his State of the County address on Monday, Cronin said he's inviting leaders in other counties to examine the "blueprint" DuPage created to eliminate some government entities and reform others. He also helped create Transform Illinois, a coalition of elected officials, civic groups and research institutions dedicated to promoting local government efficiency efforts.

"We want to raise the level of awareness," Cronin said. "We want to start using our experiences in DuPage to apply statewide. We want to change the culture."

Cronin has been championing consolidation as a way to save money and improve services since before he took office in December 2010.

During his first term, he launched his ACT Initiative -- Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency -- which called on 24 local governmental entities to make structural and operational reforms.

Thanks to a state law approved in 2013, DuPage has been able to dissolve a fire protection district and sanitary district. And earlier this year, Cronin successfully pushed for the state to eliminate the DuPage Fair and Exposition Authority, a group that existed only to collect state money for the annual DuPage County Fair.

"In Illinois, it's much, much easier to create a local government than it is to dissolve one," Cronin told the crowd at a Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce luncheon. "I've dissolved three, and I have plenty of scars to prove it."

In cases where DuPage stopped short of consolidation, Cronin said there's still been a savings of millions of dollars for taxpayers through simplification, collaboration, shared services, reducing unnecessary layers and using technology to make service more convenient.

"We've heard business owners and taxpayers who told us, 'Yes, we care about consolidation. But most importantly, we just want our government to work better and cost less,'" Cronin said.

Cronin said one example of that is the DuPage Water Commission, the agency that supplies Lake Michigan water to most of the towns in the county.
The commission has taken steps to wean itself off the quarter-cent sales tax, which generates about $33 million of its annual revenue. State law calls for the sales tax to be eliminated on June 1, 2016.

"Thanks to careful management and prudent financial stewardship, the quarter-cent sales tax that consumers pay to fund this agency is being eliminated in 2016," Cronin said to a round of applause.

"We're actually abolishing a tax," he said. "We're putting tax dollars back in consumers' pockets."

To prepare for the loss of the tax, the agency paid back its loans. Cronin said that will save the commission's customers about $10 million in interest and finance charges.

"This is a prime example of what government can do when leaders work together to streamline services," Cronin said.

Looking ahead, Cronin said DuPage is planning to pursue cost-saving measures with the forest preserve district. There also could be an opportunity to consolidate a street lighting district.

"We're not done," he said. "We're just getting warmed up."
DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin eyeing statewide implementation of ACT Initiative

Published: Wednesday, Oct. 21, 2015 3:10 p.m. CST

As budget season goes on in DuPage County, there have been several mentions of County Board Chairman Dan Cronin’s Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency Initiative.

The initiative is aimed at streamlining and reducing local government and already has spearheaded the dissolution of three government agencies, required stricter ethics rules and saved millions, according to county estimates.

But despite the frequent political name-dropping of the push, there has been little public movement on it in recent months.

However, Cronin said there is more coming and potentially on a much wider stage.

On Nov. 2, he and other officials across the area will come together at the University of Illinois at Chicago for the Efficiency Advantage: Stories of Collaboration & Innovation in Local Government conference.

“We feel an obligation to take this experience and put it on the stage – not to pat ourselves on the back – to show people, ‘This is what we’re doing, here’s the handbook, let’s celebrate it and let’s do what we can to change the culture,’” he said.

Cronin said he believed the approach could be brought statewide not only through the attitudes of lawmakers, but also through the Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandate Task Force headed by Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti and the expansion of a key law allowing DuPage to dissolve units of government with county-appointed boards deemed redundant or defunct.

He also said the previously announced concept of a voluntary, regional fire organization to pool services and cut costs had limited results. Though fire districts and departments had yet to band together across the entire county, existing partnerships such as the West Suburban Fire Alliance had embraced the shared system even further than they had already.

There also was continued work on the possible streamlining or eliminating of several more entities: the Century Hill Street Lighting District in Naperville, Highland Hills Sanitary District in unincorporated DuPage County near Lombard and the Salt Creek Sanitary District in Villa Park. All three were among the 24 agencies identified in the state law allowing the county to dissolve...
units of government.

Currently, the lighting district collects $17,000 each year in local tax levies to pay for the infrastructure costs of maintaining 77 street lights. Cronin said the county was working with the residents who created the district to see how they wanted to continue.

"We're making progress there," he said. "A lot of it is very door to door and localized effort."

Cronin also felt encouraged about the other two potential ACT candidates. The county expects staff to deliver a full report on both in a matter of months and as early as the end of this year.

"We think it's a desirable, good thing to do more with less, but a lot of people don't talk about it," he said.
DuPage chairman: Budget, sheriff's audit key issues in 2016

Cronin: 'We have some big challenges'
DuPage County government is facing what county board Chairman Dan Cronin is calling "a climate of uncertainty" in 2016.

The county started its fiscal year Dec. 1 knowing the budget impasse in Springfield could result in millions of dollars of lost revenue. Exactly how much is not yet known.

"We have some big challenges," Cronin said during a recent interview with the Daily Herald about his plans for 2016. "We have a very tumultuous state government right now. We don't know where we (as a county) stand. We don't know how much money will be coming to us for very important needs of the county."

The county-run DuPage Convalescent Center, for example, already has lost more than 12 percent of its reimbursements because of cuts in state funding. Cronin said he's concerned more state money could be lost for the convalescent center and certain community service programs.

"We understand what's got to play out down there (in Springfield)," he said. "But at some point, we have to make sure that we're able to fulfill our mission here."

To that end, the county board approved a $444.4 million budget for the fiscal year that Cronin says was intentionally lean.

"We think it gives us some latitude," Cronin said. "We have some ability to be nimble. We do have some reserves. I think we came up with a very responsible budget in this climate of uncertainty."

However, some of their budget decisions put county board members at odds with Sheriff John Zaruba, who strongly criticized a move to eliminate 10 full-time positions at the sheriff's office.

And while the budget increases the sheriff's annual spending from roughly $40.4 million to about $40.8 million, the office didn't get as much as Zaruba sought. The county board also rejected Zaruba's request to buy body cameras. In addition, DuPage won't purchase replacement squad cars in 2016.

After the budget was approved, Zaruba issued a written statement saying county residents "lost" because of the reduction of his office's full-time head count to 520 employees. He said the department's head count has been reduced by a total of 25 positions since 2014.

The latest reduction came after county board members said Zaruba didn't fully answer a list of questions about the department, including details about its Explorer program, an inventory of seized vehicles and the cost of having video cameras in squad cars.
"It was well-documented that we had a robust debate with the sheriff about his budget," Cronin said.

Now Zaruba has offered to resolve the dispute by allowing county Auditor Bob Grogan to do an audit of the sheriff’s office.

Cronin said he wants the audit to begin as soon as possible. He also wants it to be a "deep dive" into the department’s expenditures and revenue sources.

"I want to see a very clear picture of what’s going on there," he said.

For example, Cronin said he wants the audit to examine the sheriff’s Explorer program, which educates 14- to 20-year-olds about law enforcement. He’s already requested information about the program’s budget, staffing and the liability and/or risk management costs associated with its operation.

Cronin said he wants an analysis done of all contracts and agreements executed without county board action. In addition, he said, the audit should closely examine the management of vehicles seized by the sheriff’s office and the department’s dash-cam program.

"If the sheriff wants an audit, we’re going to give him an audit," Cronin said. "But it’s going to be an audit -- not some casual glance. This is going to be a microscope."

Cronin said the county board, which was considering hiring an independent firm to do the audit, is willing to provide resources to help Grogan.

"He may need some additional resources," Cronin said. "But I expect it (the audit) to be a deep dive. I expect it to be very thorough. And I expect that the sheriff will be 100 percent open and compliant."

The county board also is expected to make progress with its DuPage ACT (Accountability, Consolidation and Transparency) Initiative.

That initiative, launched in 2012, initially called on two dozen local governmental entities to make structural and operational reforms. Thanks to a change in state law in 2013, the ACT initiative could result in the elimination of as many as 13 of those agencies, including fire protection, sanitary and mosquito abatement districts.

Cronin said up to three entities could be targeted for consolidation in 2016 -- the Highland Hills Sanitary District, the Century Hill Street Lighting District and the North Westmont Fire Protection District.

An engineering firm was hired by the county to do an assessment of Highland Hills, which manages sanitary sewer service and water operations for more than 400 properties in Lombard. The results of that study are expected to be released soon.

Cronin said the report will help county officials determine if the sanitary district should continue operating as a stand-alone entity.

Meanwhile, the Century Hills Street Lighting District maintains streetlights in a subdivision near Naperville. The North Westmont Fire Protection District collects property taxes from the owners of 561 parcels and uses the money to pay Westmont to provide emergency response and fire services.

Cronin said consolidation is going to be part of the "new normal" for local governments.
"I do believe that a new normal will emerge out of this uncertainty from Springfield," he said. "It will be that local governments have to figure out how to work together, how to share services and how to be more efficient because they just don't have the resources to support us like they used to."

Issues: Up to 3 entities could be targeted for consolidation this year.
Local leaders have mixed reaction to state effort to trim government

Gov. Bruce Rauner signs Executive Order 15-15, creating the Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandate Task Force, which aims to find efficiencies and streamline local government functions, on Feb. 13, 2015, in Elmhurst. (John J. Kim, Chicago Tribune)

By Steve Lord and Marwa Eltagouri • Contact Reporter
Aurora Beacon-News

JANUARY 10, 2016

It doesn't take too much prodding to get DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin to talk about government consolidation.

It's his baby ... and it's been his baby for several years, since DuPage County enacted the ACT Initiative, a state approved pilot program allowing the county, with citizen support, to consolidate smaller governments whose boards are appointed by the county by taking them into the county government fold.

So it was no surprise that Cronin this week was proud to point out that DuPage's work was featured prominently in the report from Gov. Bruce Rauner's Task Force on Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandates. However, other local officials were critical of some recommendations that could

trim or target agencies that provide services to local residents.

The task force was formed about 11 months ago to look at how Illinois can save money and cut property taxes by allowing governments to consolidate, cooperate and cut down on state-mandated expenses.

Cronin, a member of the task force, said he found the spotlight on DuPage County "uncomfortable at times," but said he hopes the attention will effectively convey to other counties and legislators that consolidation is, in fact, achievable.

"A lot of folks are cynical," Cronin said. "They say, 'I appreciate your sentiment,' or, 'You're not going to be able to get rid of that government or consolidate that tax.' Yes, we can. It's hard work. It's incremental. And it takes time. But it pays dividends."

According to Cronin and the state report, the DuPage dividends include: a projected $116 million in taxpayer savings through shared services; $20 million in savings since overhauling employee benefits for county workers; and $6.9 million in savings since closing the county's youth home and instead partnering with Kane County to provide youth detention services.

State and local officials are thinking savings could be available statewide, and for that reason, the State Legislature already is considering allowing Illinois' 101 other counties to develop their own consolidation programs.

That also was in the state report dealing with government consolidation. Another of the report's recommendations already has been adopted. A four-year moratorium on creating any new local governments -- unless that new government is a result of consolidating two or more existing local governments -- became law Jan. 1.

Other recommendations could be adopted, too, such as allowing Illinois citizens to consolidate or dissolve local governments by referendum, allowing coterminous townships to consolidate with their municipalities, making it easier for townships to consolidate and allowing counties to keep their existing form of government, even if a successful referendum dissolves the townships into the county.

In all, the report has 12 recommendations concerning consolidation, and another 15 concerning unfunded mandates.

But some government officials want to make sure people understand the report is just that -- and not something that's ready for consideration by the Legislature.

"It is not a bill," said State Sen. Linda Holmes, D-Aurora, a member of the task force. "It will never all be incorporated into state law."
That's important to Holmes, because she criticizes sections of the report that indicate the main unfunded mandates that affect local government are all related to public pensions, public unions and collective bargaining, worker's compensation and adoption of the prevailing wage.

"The governor is putting in his right-to-work and turnaround agenda into (the report)," she said.

Aurora Mayor Tom Weisner said the report is only viable "if we don't have to swallow everything whole."

"There are things I would be able to support, thing I think would need further discussion – which is fine – and things I wouldn't touch with a 10-foot pole," he said.

He said the report contains "a little bit of everything." He added that consolidation "is not the worst thing in the world."

He said government cooperation that creates efficiencies and saves money, rather than consolidation, seems more viable. He pointed out that Aurora and Naperville have created a cooperative relationship on several items. Most recently, both cities agreed to discuss merging their Emergency Telephone Service Boards that oversee emergency 911 communications. That could result in savings of millions of dollars.

Indeed, in the sections of the 400-page report that deal with case studies, most are examples of cooperation between governments, rather than consolidation. In some cases, state law makes it impossible for governments to consolidate, which is why a number of the report's recommendations deal with the Legislature simply amending state law to allow it. Consolidation itself would be done locally by a referendum of the people.

"It's making sure we don't create a layer" that gets in the way, Holmes said.

As far as unfunded mandates go, while the report addresses a handful of them, it also points out that the Illinois Municipal League had identified 266 unfunded mandates that have been imposed on municipalities since 1982 – an average of about eight a year.

And the Illinois Association of School Districts reported 145 unfunded mandates on schools since 1992. That's an average of about six new ones a year.

"We haven't looked at unfunded mandates for 28 years, so, yes, review them (every two years)," Holmes said.

A number of the recommendations in the report concern consolidating and dissolving township government, which doesn't surprise Aurora Township Supervisor Bill Catching.

"They've been trying to get rid of us for years, and (townships) don't go away because we provide needed
services very efficiently," he said.

He pointed out that in the case of Aurora Township, the owner of a $100,000 house pays about $105 a year in taxes to the township.

"If someone absorbs us, that $105 isn't going to go away," he said.

Still, he said there is plenty of room for discussion of consolidating townships, and cooperation between townships. For instance, Aurora Township handles General Assistance cases for Blackberry and Kaneville townships, because those smaller, rural townships have no staff.

"I think every elected official worth his salt is looking at ways to save money," Catching said. "Consolidation, cooperation, privatizing – they're always on the table."

Officials also pointed out that just because the Legislature allows something, it might not fit a local situation.

Cronin said while the ACT Initiative has helped DuPage County, it should be seen as a guide for other counties, not a "one size fits all" model.

"You could take our playbook and use it at other places, but you have to have some sort of assessment," he said. "We (DuPage County) engaged in conversation. We found common ground. It's really hard work, and you have to have a good understanding of what the potential is in your particular area."

*Steve Lord is a reporter for the Beacon-News. Marwa Eltagouri is a reporter for the Chicago Tribune.*

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**This article is related to:** Bruce Rauner, Linda Holmes, Dan Cronin
State says DuPage County's consolidation efforts are a model for others

By Marwa Eltagouri - Contact Reporter
Chicago Tribune

JANUARY 11, 2016, 2:45 PM

A state task force's recommendation to give all 102 counties in Illinois the authority to dissolve or consolidate their government units largely stems from DuPage County's own success in downsizing.

The Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandates Take Force's final report, which was released this week by Illinois Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti, includes 12 recommendations for reducing the number of units for local government within Illinois. The task force suggests counties follow in the footsteps of DuPage, which in 2012 launched its Accountability Consolidation Transparency Initiative to promote consolidating governing bodies and services within the county's framework.

The state has the highest number of municipalities and special district governments in the nation, at 1,298 and 3,227, respectively, according to the report findings. The state also has at least 6,000 taxing units of government.

"This report shows the efficiencies and inefficiencies within local governments, and provides concepts on how to give the people of Illinois more control over their future and their tax dollars," said Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner in a statement Monday.

County Board Chairman Dan Cronin said he was thrilled to see DuPage used as the model for government consolidation by state officials, who praised the ACT Initiative within the report. They outlined the program's cost savings: A projected $116 million in taxpayer savings through shared services, $20 million in savings since overhauling employee benefits for county workers, and $6.9 million in savings since closing the county's youth home and instead partnering with Kane County to provide youth detention services.

Cronin, a member of the task force, said he found the spotlight on DuPage County "uncomfortable at times," but said he hopes the attention will effectively convey to other counties and legislators that consolidation is, in fact, achievable.

"A lot of folks are cynical," Cronin said. "They say, 'I appreciate your sentiment,' or, 'You're not going to be able to get rid of that government or consolidate that tax.' Yes, we can. It's hard work. It's incremental. And it takes time. But it pays dividends."

He added that the ACT Initiative should be a guide for other counties, and that it isn't a "one size fits all" model.

"You could take our playbook and use it at other places, but you have to have some sort of assessment. We (DuPage County) engaged in conversation. We found common ground," Cronin said. "It's really hard work, and you have to have a good understanding of what the potential is in your particular area."

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