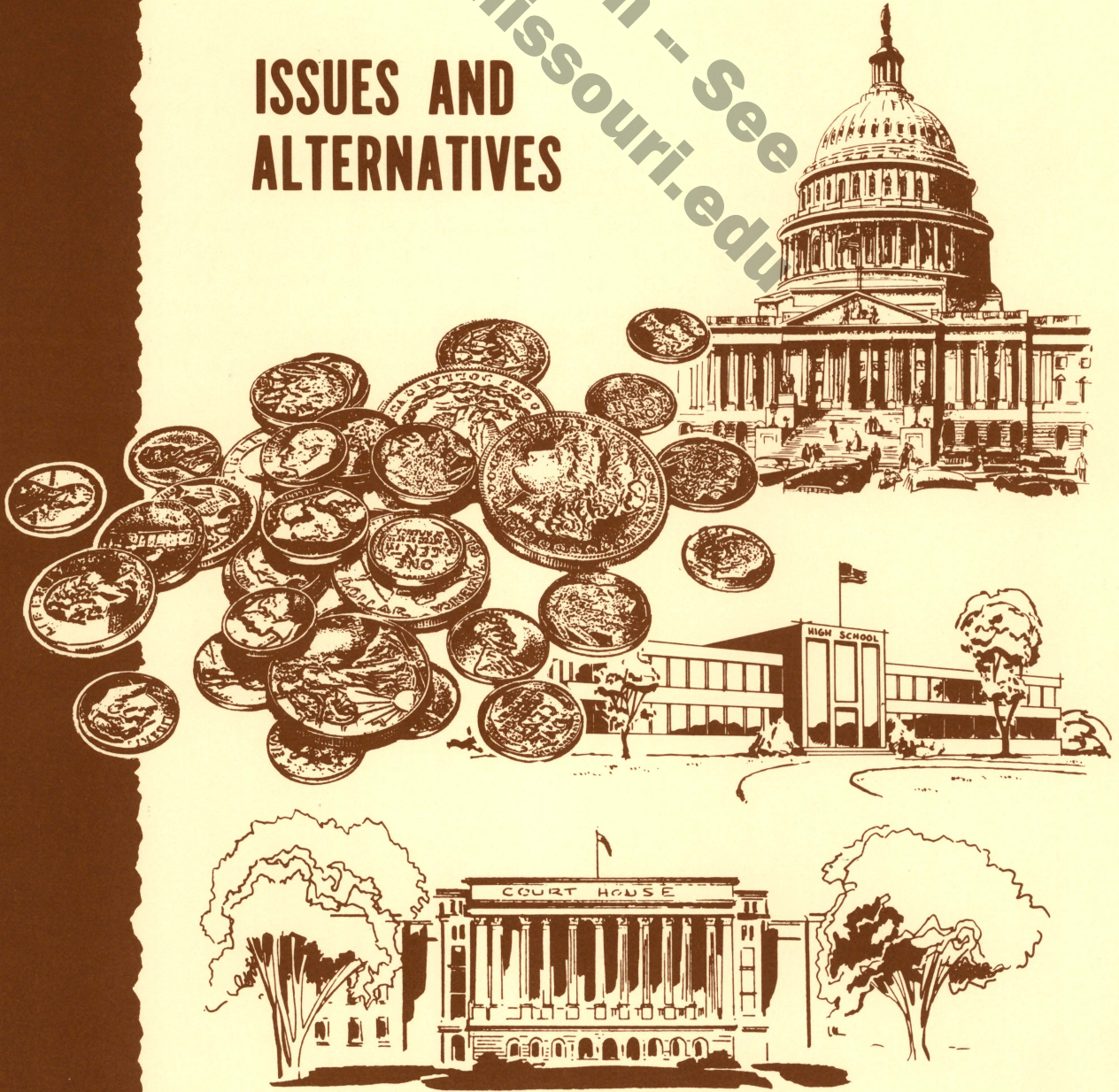


# PROVIDING PUBLIC SERVICES

*...in Missouri*

**ISSUES AND  
ALTERNATIVES**



## Stresses on Local Government

EXTENSION DIVISION UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA MP 226, 71 3M

State and local governments throughout the nation face financial crisis. As President Nixon said in his 1971 State of the Union Message: "The financial squeeze on state and local government is acute and shows no sign of becoming less painful." This situation is no less acute in Missouri. Our most pressing problem is finding more efficient and effective methods of providing needed public facilities and services. The problem will grow in magnitude with continued rise in population, inflation, and demands for services unless alternative methods of dealing with it are understood and applied. This can best be accomplished by public study and discussion of the issues and alternatives. The University of Missouri is committed to such public affairs education. As the State University, it must help the citizens of Missouri to better understand and deal with critical issues. The University can provide facts and present alternatives for consideration. *But only the people of Missouri can or should decide what to do about public issues.*

This education program is the result of two years of preparation by the University. It is designed to help you to better understand and deal with the critical problem of meeting the growing demands upon government.

— C. Brice Ratchford, Interim President —  
University of Missouri

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# Stresses on Local Government

*Fred Culver*  
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Missouri has 115 counties or county-type governments, 343 townships, 856 municipalities, and over 1800 special districts, a total of more than 3100 local governmental units. All are creatures of the state, and their powers are only those expressly granted by constitution, statute, or charter. The grant may be for routine governmental services (streets and roads, law enforcement, record keeping, education, tax assessment and collection), for proprietary services (water, electric power, mass transit), or for both. Functions of counties are almost solely governmental in nature. Municipal functions may be both governmental and proprietary. Special purpose districts are generally limited to only one function, which may be of either type.

The pressures which operate on local governmental officials are numerous. On any issue one or more groups exert pressures for action in the direction they see as being to their advantage or in their interest. The direction governmental action takes is usually determined by the resultant of these various pressures.

*Some of the pressure groups readily identified are:*

*Voters or constituents*

*State government and agencies thereof*

*Federal government and agencies thereof*

*Political parties*

*Special purpose districts*

*Governmental employees*

*Special interest groups*

Even this brief listing suggests the variety of interests the different groups have, especially since there is often disagreement within a particular group. It is difficult to envision any issue on which there would be unanimity. Decision for action on a specific issue then becomes the response to these conflicting pressures. Some of the general directions these pressures take merit brief examination.

# Directions of Group Pressures

## Voters or Constituents

The voters have certain definite desires or expectations, e. g. that their local government will be:

1. Economical, imposing a minimal tax load.
2. Functional, providing an adequate level of services.
3. Efficient, reacting effectively to requests or to changing conditions.
4. Impartial, treating all constituents alike.

In the minds of most voters, economy is equated with a low visible tax load. The property tax is still the principal source of county and special district revenue and an important source of municipal revenue. Paid once a year by cash or personal check, it is highly visible, a major expenditure by the taxpayer, and prompts his inevitable question, "What do those guys at the courthouse (or city hall) do with all that money?"

Levies such as the sales tax or income tax are paid in smaller installments or by withholding and are less apparent to the taxpayer. Most other revenue producers, users fees, licenses, and the like, are paid only indirectly by the taxpayers and are not of such concern to him. His desire for economy in government is usually in the form of a general concern and stems from his feeling that most governments are over-staffed and careless with his money. He is seldom concerned with specifics such as unit costs, individual work loads, control of purchasing, or management systems.

Of at least equal strength (and in some part contradictory) is the taxpayer's desire for a government which provides adequate services. The street, road, or bridge should be properly constructed and well maintained. Schools should provide a full curriculum, a modern plant, and qualified teachers. A visit to courthouse or city hall should result in a speedy answer to any question, and the service should be courteous. The impounder, the health nurse, the building inspector, the law enforcers, the trash collectors, the firemen should all be performing their traditional services promptly and effectively.

## Conflict of Desires

Taxpayers also desire an efficient government, particularly as regards its responsiveness to change or emergency. This desire may conflict with the desire for economy and for maintenance of traditional services. Voters have a feeling that local government is behind the

times as they observe the rapid flow of events and the emergence of new concerns and problems. They look to government at all levels, including the local level, to recognize these concerns and make an attempt to solve the problems. If speedy response is not forthcoming there is sharp criticism of local officials.

Often the delay stems from restrictive statutes rather than from apathy on the part of officials or their reluctance to change established practices. A perennial complaint of voters is that the machinery of government bureaucracy is ponderously inefficient; and such judgments are often based on the failure of their governments to act quickly in response to an identified need or concern.

## Want Government in a Goldfish Bowl

Some of the pressures voters exert on local government arise from their conception of democratic norms. They want government to be impartial, based on laws and policies which apply and are implemented for all alike regardless of socio-economic class, race, or other difference. They want government—and officials—to perform in a goldfish bowl, for all the world to see. The public business, they feel, is everyone's business and they resent any suggestion of executive sessions of public bodies or restriction on the free flow of information. It is true that each individual would like special consideration from his government and equally true that he is often prejudiced. If the issue can be clearly drawn, however, between justice and injustice, between special privilege and impartiality, a majority will usually support democratic norms.

The local official is always keenly aware of the pressures from his constituents. It is oversimplifying to attribute this entirely to his desire for re-election or for popularity, as strong as these desires are. He is in nearly every case sincerely desirous of meeting his constituents' needs and carrying out their wishes. Often these latter two are far from the same, especially as issues may be distorted by the activities of vociferous pressure groups and the sometimes mischievous or sensational publicity by mass media. The official always needs to be aware of the appearance of his acts as well as their substance. To concentrate exclusively on his image is self-serving and demagogic, but to neglect it is political suicide.

## State and State Agencies

Pressures from state officials and state agencies are

exerted in at least four directions. One is for the local officials to accept and discharge responsibilities delegated to them. A second is for maintenance of essential local services. A third is for adequate record keeping and prompt submittal of required reports. The last is for adequate funding of joint or cooperative programs.

These pressures are massive and compelling since local governments are the creature of the state, and in Missouri have only such powers as have been expressly granted them by statute.

Almost without exception local officials perform certain governmental functions as the agent of the state. The whole system of law enforcement and justice, the conduct of elections, and the maintenance of essential records are prime examples of this. While the services are performed in a limited jurisdiction by local officials they are still essentially state functions.

The statutes governing such functions are specific and machinery is provided to ensure the proper discharge of these duties by local officials. This is the book by which they live. In many instances these functions require expenditures over which the local unit has no control. Increasingly the effect of state legislation has been to reduce the portion (or percentage) of local expenditures over which the local officials have effective control.

### **Influence Local Taxing**

Some other services are more local in nature but strong pressure is exerted from the state level for their provision. The process of property tax assessment and collection is an outstanding example of this. This source of revenue is no longer of importance for the support of state government. The State Tax Commission, however, can and often does exert powerful influence on all the county officials involved in this process.

The Commission's concern is with maintaining a level of property valuations (in percentage of actual value) which will be uniform over the state. Its specific responsibilities in this regard are to prevent inequities in valuation levels between counties, and also between properties which are evaluated locally and those such as railroads and utilities which are evaluated at the state level.

The county is the local unit with primary responsibility for property assessments. Municipalities may set individual assessments lower than the county assessor does but may not exceed his figures. Statutory authority exists to force local officials to conform with state directions on total assessment level as well as on specific assessments. This is

one of the principal concerns of local officials, since often their constituents who pay the property taxes are exerting pressure in one direction and the Tax Commission is exerting pressure in the other.

Much, if not most, of the record keeping necessary for the orderly conduct of organized society is done at the local level. Real estate titles, probate proceedings, civil and criminal judicial records, and marriage licenses are typical of these essential records. Voter registration and records of elections are another important set of records. The state is also vitally interested in this function and exerts strong pressure for both its prompt performance and adequate funding. A number of periodic reports on the performance of various duties also are required by statute.

### **Prompt Reporting Essential**

Prompt reporting is a must in any bureaucracy and certainly the state is no exception. One of the continuing pressures on local officials, particularly county and city clerks, is the preparation of the reports, vital or trivial, so dear to the bureaucrat's heart.

Many governmental functions rely on funding from both local and state levels. Obvious examples are the schools, county and city health units, welfare programs, and food distribution programs. Whether the provisions for cost sharing are statutory or based on administrative rulings, the pressure is exerted on responsible officials to provide the local resources. Often, especially in the case of new or expanded services, the pressure is exerted by other groups beside the state agency concerned. Many of these services are discretionary rather than mandatory by statute. The decreasing percentage of local revenues available for such services greatly increases the pressures on local officials, caught as they are between the demands for services and the lack of available funds.

### **Federal Government and Agencies**

Pressures on local government from the federal level differ in many respects from those exerted from the state level. While there has been an increasingly close relationship in the last two or three decades between the federal and local levels, it still does not approach that existing between state and local levels. The very structure of our governmental system assures this condition.

Federal pressures are felt locally in three areas: federal aid programs, joint federal-local programs, and the area of

special federal interest or responsibility.

Most federal aid programs are instituted in response to a need or problem identified by localities. The enacted legislation is usually national in scope, so that funds are available for local governments in all the states. In many cases a particular local government may not have knowledge of the program, or may not have identified the need as a high priority one. The pressure for engaging in the program will perhaps come initially from the federal agency conducting the program.

A characteristic of bureaucracies is the drive for empire building. Secretaries, directors, bureau chiefs, all want their program to be a constantly expanding one. The consequence is a continual pressure on local governments to institute this or that program, and so secure some of the federal dollars. Often the money is not available this fiscal year, but if enough localities will just pile up the applications, it will be available next year.

Since many of the programs have been publicized nationally, there is often some local pressure for a specific program before there is any possibility of its implementation locally. The other side of the coin is that without some such promotion many potentially useful programs might never come to the attention of local people or local officials. At times, however, the aggressive salesmanship of some aid programs is disproportionate to both their possible benefits and the prospective level of funding.

### **Federal Pressure for Reports and Funds**

As in the case of the state, the pressure is strong from the federal level for adequate records and prompt reporting. Obviously, much of this is a requisite for proper management of public funds and meaningful evaluation of programs. It is sometimes carried to the point of absurdity, if not to the point of completely frustrating local participants, by a concentration on the details of forms and reports and a neglect of the actual program effectiveness. This may be an annoyance rather than a pressure, but it still can have a negative effect on an otherwise attractive and valuable federal aid program.

Nearly all federal aid programs require a contribution of local matching funds, the percentage varying according to the specific conditions of the grant. This often produces considerable pressure on local governments to provide the necessary funds from their limited revenues. Since hundreds of federal aid programs are now available to communities, pressures of this sort are great and increasing.

Another pressure felt from the federal level is for compliance in certain areas of special federal interest. The necessity for compliance in the area of civil rights, including equal employment opportunities, is an example. Minimum wage requirements are another. Even though the local government may not be participating, there are many

federal laws or regulations which apply to the programs and must be followed.

### **Political Parties**

In Missouri most local candidates have a party label. In many instances of non-partisan municipal elections, the party affiliation of the candidates is widely recognized and has greater or lesser influence.

The office holder elected on a party ticket is expected to recognize certain obligations to his party. Patronage should not go to "the others." Other office holders of the same party affiliation should be treated tenderly, even if their performance in discharging the public trust is less than admirable. Large contributors to the party coffers should have polite, if not preferential, consideration in all matters which affect their interests.

Many of these specifics are requested of the office holder, and there are demands of a more general nature, such as adherence to the party ideology. Such pressures are often compelling, since the office holder feels a strong obligation to the many fellow partisans who support him.

### **Special Purpose Districts**

Missouri has a multiplicity of special purpose districts, few of which are directly responsible to the local unit of general government; i.e., the municipality or the county. All of them, however, have some sort of working relationship with the local government. Most of them exert some sort of pressure on local officials to provide funds or services of some sort. School districts, for example, are very much concerned with the level of assessed valuation since both a substantial part of their operating revenues and nearly all their capital funds come from property taxes. Special road districts have the same concerns and are in need of funds and services for bridge construction and maintenance, the use of special road equipment, and similar assistance.

Special note should be taken of the pressures arising from competition for a share of the local tax dollar. The taxpayer thinks in terms of the total local property tax levy. As it has increased over the years the opposition to any additional levies has become stronger. At joint elections, when separate levies for special purposes are voted on, the effect is sometimes to defeat them all. If separate elections are held, the later proposals often are less favorably received. There is considerable pressure, therefore, on local general governments to defer any such request for their own purpose until the requests of the special districts have been acted on at the polls, and vice versa.

The newest form of special district in Missouri, the multi-county planning region, exerts a number of pressures on local governments. Financial support for the

planning program itself is a requisite. Regional projects require participation by the individual local governments in terms of manpower, money, and services. Local governments are in many instances called upon to place regional concerns above local concerns, a difficult adjustment to make. Many projects under federal programs formerly handled directly with the federal agency must now be reviewed and approved by the regional planning commission (in accordance with Bureau of the Budget Circulars A-95 and A-98) before they are eligible for funding.

### Governmental Employees

One pressure group within the local government itself is becoming more evident and more vocal—the employees. Their principal pressures, similar to those of any labor group, are generally for higher wages, shorter hours, and fringe benefits. If the local administrator is an appointed professional, the relations, the pressures, and the responses are much like those in private industry, except in the special case of functions whose uninterrupted operation is essential to public health or safety. These include police protection, fire protection, utilities, waste disposal, and the like.

If the administrator is an elected official, then the relationships are usually different and there is a different sort of response, particularly in the smaller units. There are closer personal relationships, since employees are political associates and supporters of the officials. Pressure usually is exerted by the individual rather than by employees as a group, and the response is often on the same individual basis, rather than being a change in general policy or procedure.

### Special Interest Groups

Pressures are exerted by individuals and groups for many sorts of benefits they desire from their local government. In many instances these are seen as direct economic benefits for the petitioners. Obvious examples would be lowered property assessments, exclusive franchises, substantial government purchases from a favored supplier rather than on the basis of lowest and best bid price, transfer of public

property by private treaty, and similar special benefits. Local governments can also greatly influence the welfare of a special group or even an individual by their decisions on priorities for public expenditures either by geographic areas or by allocation of their resources between different governmental functions. Most of these actions, if exposed to public view, bring immediate reaction and counter-pressure from the substantial numbers who either desire similar favors or who sincerely resent special treatment of this sort, regardless of who the specific beneficiaries may be.

Much of the special pleading and some of the strongest pressures come from groups not economically motivated. They are interested in a specific cause, or a specific action or facility. It may be better welfare services, more sidewalks, adequate street lighting, or voter registration. Whatever the banner they march under, their zeal is usually great, their motives of the best, and their activities usually highly visible and a fertile field for exploitation by the mass media. All this produces very considerable pressure on the local authorities.

### Groups Seeking Access to the System

A special pressure has been more evident in recent years from groups at different income levels and of varying ages and political philosophies. This is pressure for access to the system. They are critical of slow response, contemptuous of existing practice, and skeptical of motives and objectives of officials. They are alienated and desire involvement in the governmental process. Seldom is their pressure for any specific action, except on an ad hoc basis.

Those who do seek access to the system should meet a prompt response from local officials. It is not enough to merely recognize these groups and listen to them, although this is the first and essential step. They must also feel that their participation can be and is meaningful in public decision-making. Only this sort of involvement can reduce their feelings of alienation. **If alienation or exclusion from the decision-making process can not be overcome at the local level it becomes almost impossibly difficult to combat it at the state or national level.** Unfortunately, many local officials can not or will not recognize this, although many programs such as Model Cities give lip service to the principle of “citizen involvement.”

# Responses to Pressures

Many new office holders have failed to realize prior to being sworn in that in a democracy our officials are subject to pressures. As they become more seasoned their responses fall into a pattern which generally becomes rather consistent and often predictable. The types of responses may be roughly classified as:

- refusal to yield
- surrender
- compromise
- delay
- counter-attack
- evasion

## Refusal to Yield

*Refusal to yield* to a particular demand from a pressure group may arise from a number of causes. The proposed action may be impossible because of legal restrictions. It may require expenditures so far beyond the available revenues that is out of the question. In some cases the action or project is so much at variance with the official's concept of the proper functions of the governmental unit that it is summarily rejected. Sometimes, particularly with smaller units of government, the flat refusal is based on a reverence for tradition or precedent, in other words, an extreme reluctance to change. The response is often, "We have never done it before," and this is presumed to end the discussion.

## Surrender

At the other end of the continuum is speedy *surrender* to the pressure. This usually comes about where the pressure is extremely strong. Occasionally, but rarely, the suggested action is one whose merits are obvious and command immediate favorable response.

Often the pressures come from several influential groups, perhaps as the result of previous publicity, and this elicits a rapid acquiescence. A crisis situation can often speed a favorable response. Surrender, however, and an immediate agreement are rare except on relatively small or routine requests.

## Compromise

*Compromise* is a common response and a hallmark of any political system. There is seldom a single pressure. More commonly several occur which conflict to a greater or lesser degree. A compromise might be on a middle ground attempting to take a position which will partially satisfy the demands from two or more groups whose objectives are not

in total agreement. Another common compromise is to shift the governmental position only slightly in the direction desired by the petitioners.

## Delay

*Delay*, like compromise, is a classic response. County courts take the matter under advisement. City councils table the matter. Often these delaying tactics do not arise so much from disagreement with or opposition to the requests as they do from a settled reluctance to take any precipitate action. Most politicians like to consult with a few trusted advisers who are either knowledgeable in the area of interest or skilled at gauging the probable public reaction. A further consideration is the glare of publicity which beats upon the official, so that his decisions are announced by the media as soon as he has made them. He is reluctant to make a decision today which might need to be reversed tomorrow, since the public reaction to such apparent vacillation is usually unfavorable.

Some responses may have a delaying effect but are often rational and necessary. An example would be the appointment of a study committee or task force to review the problem and recommend appropriate action to the officials. This response may be either for the purpose of more rational problem-solving, for more citizen involvement in decision-making, or simply in the hope that the whole matter will be quietly buried and forgotten. The desired action or inaction is usually secured by a discriminating choice of the committee membership and leadership by the officials who make the selection.

## Counter-Attack

On occasion the reaction to pressure might be a vigorous opposing pressure or *counter-attack*. The group pressing for an expanded service might be told that a disproportionate amount of resources are already being devoted to it and that undue effort would probably cause a public demand for curtailment rather than expansion. Another counter pressure is to threaten the discontinuance of an existing program highly approved by the groups in order that the new program may be established. These and similar tactics are used rather sparingly because of the danger of alienating the pressure groups by such positive and open opposition.

## Evasion

A number of evasive actions may be taken in response to pressures. Passing the buck by disclaiming jurisdiction or responsibility and diverting the pressure to another agency



or official is a time-hallowed procedure. Undue delay or procrastination is another common device. Sometimes this is done with an initial encouraging response, a considerable

period for cooling off, and a final reluctant refusal. Evasive tactics are usually effective only for a limited period, rather than as a policy of continuing effectiveness.

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## Possible Actions by Officials

Beyond the immediate responses by local officials to the many and often conflicting pressures are the actions they may take to change the conditions or the policies which are the basic reasons for many of the pressures. Some of these actions may be taken without in any way changing the constitutional or statutory framework of local government. Others may require more basic or far-reaching changes and thus require revision of the legal structure.

In the first category are policies which may emphasize economy of operations, efficiency of operations, or improved services. These are not altogether mutually exclusive, and in most cases any attempt to make a local government more functional will include efforts for all these purposes. The primary emphasis will, however, vary with the priorities as seen by the officials and their constituents.

The almost universal feeling by the individual that his taxes are too high causes a general demand for low cost government. Officials who respond to this devote their principal efforts to keeping taxes down. This is accomplished largely by curtailing services, since few other courses are open to them in an inflationary economy. This all-out effort at low cost government is more common in rural areas and those which have consistently maintained a rather minimal level of services.

The emphasis on increased efficiency in government is more evident in larger local jurisdictions or those which have a structure which places administrative responsibility largely in the hands of a professional manager or administrator. This type of effort is possible and productive, however, in any local governmental structure. It is more difficult to effect if administrative and/or budgetary powers are divided among a large number of elected officials, and there is less possibility of real efficiency through the use of modern management tools in the smallest local units.

**The efforts toward increased efficiency might include:**

- 1. Sound administrative practices such as well defined lines of authority, proper delegation of responsibility and authority, and clear, written policy guidelines.**

- 2. Operations analyses, both absolute and comparative.**
- 3. Adequate current records of operations and costs.**
- 4. Sound central purchasing practices.**
- 5. Personnel policies which are firm, impartial, and comparable with those in private industry.**
- 6. Use of modern tools such as computers.**

### **Financing Better Services**

Some governments concentrate on more and better services. In nearly every instance this will require more revenue, although this entire increase need not be reflected in the local tax rate. Officials who place the emphasis on improved services *can supplement the necessary additional local funds by such methods as:*

- 1. Cooperation with other local governments or with private units for joint services or facilities.*
- 2. Shifting program priorities; e.g., phasing out less important or outmoded programs and expanding or initiating more needed or newer programs.*
- 3. Improving their grantsmanship skills to avail themselves of funds from federal and state sources.*

In the second category are those actions which require constitutional and/or statutory changes. These may be either superficial or fundamental. In either case, they require much more time and effort, since they necessitate action at the state rather than the local level.

In many instances these statutory changes have been piecemeal or have come as a response to a specific, often localized, request. They usually deal with only one function or service, and are often limited to a small, special group of local governments. They may be in response to a crisis situation. In nearly every case they do not change the structure or function of local governments, but only confer some additional but strictly limited authority or responsibility. The grant of discretionary powers to local administrative officials to set property tax levies at a higher rate than previously allowed might well be placed in this category.

Other changes might be more fundamental and far reaching. These attempt to effect change which will strike at the more basic problems which impede the proper functioning of local government. Among such changes might be noted:

1. *Change in the structure itself.*
  - a. *Change in number and functions of officials.*
  - b. *Change from elected to appointed administrators.*
2. *Adopting statutes which would allow residual powers to local governments and in other respects provide local officials the authority to meet their responsibilities.*
3. *Change in inter-governmental relationships and responsibilities, such as:*

- a. *Forced or facilitated consolidation or combination of units*
  - b. *Making special purpose districts responsible to the local general government.*
4. *Direct revenue sharing measures, such as the present shared motor fuels tax. Other possibilities might include a shared sales or income tax levied on a state basis but apportioned to local units.*

Obviously, the restructuring or overhauling approach is not only more fundamental, but is also one which requires more careful planning and would have more lasting effects than the piecemeal or reactive type of legislation.

# Projections

Local government in large cities encounters almost intolerable pressures. The situation is increasingly serious for local governments in satellite cities and suburban counties. A part of this arises from the rapid growth of population in these areas, but of at least equal weight is the inability of these governments to respond rationally and speedily to demands from their citizens.

In most instances the failure to function stems from lack of revenue, or from the restrictions imposed by an archaic structure of local government, and by constitutional and statutory provisions which handcuff local officials.

The problems can only be compounded by a continuing growth of population in metropolitan complexes. A national policy to redirect population trends is long overdue, but seems now to have growing attention and support. The inevitable consequence will be greatly increased pressures on already harassed local governments in many non-metropolitan areas. The situation there will become acute as it is now in more populous areas.

All local governments will be asked to assume more responsibilities in the future if the growing movement toward decentralization of functions continues. Increasingly, the local governments are being asked to assume the direction of programs which often originate and are funded in whole or in part at a higher level of government.

Both of these trends, for a redistribution of population and for decentralization of governmental activities, are seen as desirable by many who are concerned with public affairs. Neither can be readily carried out in Missouri without changes in the structure of local government. These changes, both in scope and nature, are potentially so fundamental and far reaching that they merit careful study by citizens generally as well as by public officials and political scientists. This study should be followed by the development and enactment of legislation for its implementation.

The future of local government in Missouri as a viable part of the political structure depends on such constructive changes. They are long overdue.

This publication is one of six reference documents prepared for the educational program on *Providing Public Services in Missouri—Issues and Alternatives*. The educational program of which this publication is a part was developed by a UMC interdepartmental committee co-chaired by Professors Clarence Klingner and Bryan Phifer. The six publications in the series are:

1. *Stresses on Local Government*
2. *Political Culture of Missouri*
3. *Trends in State and Local Government Finance in Missouri 1960-68*
4. *Some Basic Principles of Public Financing*
5. *Alternatives for Reorganizing County Government*
6. *Alternatives for Providing Needed Public Facilities and Services*

These basic reference documents supplement the study-discussion leaflets prepared for the educational program. They are intended for use by group discussion leaders and for those who want more information than provided in the discussion leaflets.



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