

Move municipal mergers ahead

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Wisconsin has 230 police departments with full-time officers. And only six - including Cottage Grove and Sauk Prairie - are joint departments, according to the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance.

If you drive a straight route from the state Capitol in Madison west to Middleton, no fewer than seven law enforcement agencies could pull you over.

That might be good for traffic enforcement. But it wastes taxpayer money.

Imagine the savings if only one or two agencies patrolled that short stretch of road. They'd do a fine job of enforcing the law at less cost.

Now imagine if all of Wisconsin's more than 3,100 local units of government did more to share services or merge with neighboring communities.

That goal gained momentum last week when local government leaders from across the state released a lengthy report on the need for more cooperation - particularly on recycling, public health and animal control services as well as law enforcement, fire and EMS.

The Local Government Institute report detailed how combining services can create efficiencies to save money. Instead of two fire chiefs, for example, maybe only one is needed to lead a single department for two neighboring communities? Instead of two expensive ladder trucks, maybe a merged fire agency can share the same truck and sell the other?

Merging services across municipal boundaries also can delay the need for big capital expenses and create more incentive to scrutinize spending because more officials have to sign off on budgets, the LGI report suggested.

"Residents of our communities do not see lines drawn on the street indicating where the municipal lines are drawn," said Jean Jacobson, a town leader and former county executive in Racine County. "They do question why different garbage trucks painted different colors come into the same neighborhood each week, crossing over each other picking up the garbage."

Given the recession, chronic state budget deficits and public resistance to property tax hikes, now is the time to move more mergers ahead.

The LGI's "Roadmap for government transformation" emphasizes sharing services rather than combining entire communities.

Yet consolidating local governments with similar needs should still be explored - as it was with the town and city of Verona in 2008. And the Legislature needs to help make consolidation easier.

The Legislature still has time to approve Assembly Joint Resolution 65. This sensible proposal would let municipalities and school districts phase in tax rate changes over time if they merge.

Gradual change in tax rates makes it easier to consolidate because the focus is on long-term savings rather than short-term pain for one partner or another.

A key committee unanimously approved AJR 65. It also cleared the Assembly by a huge margin in a past session.

Wisconsin needs to accelerate municipal cooperation to help balance local budgets without reducing services.