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Wausau mayor wants state to help cities team up

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Wausau Mayor Jim Tipple and several other central Wisconsin leaders are asking the state to help municipal governments cooperate -- and for permission to jointly collect taxes to pay for services.

"We know government needs to be more efficient," Tipple told the Wausau Daily Herald. "People are demanding the same high level of services, and the same taxes. You cannot continue to produce services that they demand with escalating costs."

A coalition called the Local Government Institute, which includes the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, the Wisconsin Counties Association, the Wisconsin Towns Association and the Wisconsin Alliance of Cities, says that increasing local government collaboration will work better than consolidation of local governments.

The institute seeks a Joint Legislative Council study on cooperation between county and municipal officials, with the goal of enacting new laws to increase efficiencies.

"We are optimistic this will make it through the process," Gary Becker, the institute's executive director, said Friday.

Terry Anderson, director of the Joint Legislative Council, said the council currently has about 45 requests for special study committees. Typically, 10 to 15 topics are selected, he said.

"Our goal is to have the studies identified by the end of April," he said.

In an 81-page report titled the "roadmap for government transformation" released this month, the Local Government Institute says the idea of governments cooperating to provide services is not new and has been debated since the 1950s. At least a dozen special commissions and task forces have explored the relationship between local governments.

But "very little" has been accomplished to improve their ability to work together, the report concludes.

Darryl Mayfield of Mosinee, a taxpayer member of the institute's board, said the time is right for local government officials to look "beyond the boundaries," work together more and trust each other.

"We believe there is enough interest in the state of Wisconsin to change," said Mayfield, who owns Window Tinters Plus. "We believe, in the end, it does save money."

Tipple said new laws are needed that would allow local governments to create special taxing districts, utilizing both property and sales taxes, to pay for combined services, such as a regional transit authority or a regional fire department.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we didn't have five different police departments (in the Wausau area)?" Tipple said.

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