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Local government leaders: End 'turf' wars, merge services

By Steve Walters

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Walters

Saying their backs are up against fiscal walls, local government leaders are reorganizing and promising to set aside decades of petty political jealousies to work together in new, bold ways. Meet Urban Alliance, for example, and say goodbye to the Wisconsin Alliance of Cities.

There's more to it, of course.

First, the numbers: There are 1,922 local governments in Wisconsin. (There are 1,257 towns, 403 villages, 190 cities and 72 counties.) Those 1,922 local governments spent \$11.79 billion in 2008, according to the state Department of Revenue. And that doesn't include spending by the 537 special, one-purpose districts statewide -- sewerage, sanitary and lake-rehabilitation districts.

Second, the goal: City, county, village and town leaders called a Capitol press conference to promise to find new ways to cooperate, share resources, merge services and be more efficient. The alternative, they said, is dismantling programs relied on by residents of their communities.

Local governments must "change the way we do business," said Mark O'Connell, executive director of the Wisconsin Counties Association.

Instead of petty political jealousies over which unit of government provides which services, and who should pay for them in the future, O'Connell said local officials must now begin to "trust" each other, ask the "what if..." questions and not be afraid of the answers.

"We need to start asking that," O'Connell added. He said the new push to cooperate and consolidate is compatible with the Wisconsin Way special interest coalition plan he backs that would, among other things, raise the 5 percent sales tax to reduce property taxes. The WCA is part of the Wisconsin Way.

Third, the context: Local government leaders also said know that state taxes won't be raised to help them.

William Mielke, a director of the Local Government Institute of Wisconsin, said: "The solution to the property tax, while sorely needed, is a complex and politically charged process which will take a major effort to reform. Therefore, we chose to focus on how communities can better function under the current tax system."

Also, there are library shelves groaning under the weight of past studies on how local governments could, and should, merge to provide common services and suggesting new ways to pay for those services.

Since the 1950s, Mielke said, "There are at least 14 reports which had many great ideas and proposals for improving our government functions." None of them were adopted, though.

So, there's a stop-me-if-you-have-heard-this-before dimension to the new promises of local leaders.

But one specific change is happening: Directors of the Wisconsin Alliance of Cities, which has represented the state's largest communities for decades, recently voted to dissolve. And, in May, directors of the League of Wisconsin Municipalities are expected to vote to approve a new group, the Urban Alliance, which will represent the up to 70 communities with 10,000 or more residents.

Curt Witynski, assistant director of the League, will run the Urban Alliance.

Ed Huck, the veteran lobbyist and leader of the Wisconsin Alliance of Cities, will be out of work on Dec. 31. Alliance spokesman Rich Eggleston, a Capitol reporter for the Associated Press before he joined the Alliance, is scheduled to lose his job on June 30.

Huck said he doesn't know what his next career stop will be, but he's fine stepping away from the Capitol.

"Curt is well known in the Capitol," Huck said. "He's a very good lobbyist."

Witynski said creating the Urban Alliance makes sense because, "Members will be paying only one dues check to one organization, saving money for those cities that (now) belong to both organizations. And, League advocacy efforts will be strengthened by having one organization speaking with one voice ... and having all big-city mayors fully engaged."

Also, Witynski probably won't be banned from any lawmaker's office, as Huck was in the mid-1990s.

After bluntly criticizing a bill, and saying the lawmaker who sponsored it should resign, Huck said he was banned from the offices of the top three Republican Assembly leaders. All three have since left the Legislature.

Then, Huck said he was afraid he would lose his job, as the top day-to-day lobbyist in the Capitol for the largest cities but someone who could not call on Assembly leaders.

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Huck said he now feels vindicated, because the three Republicans who banned him from their offices were charged with crimes in the so-called "caucus" scandal in 2002.

In hindsight, Huck said, "There are worse things" than being banned from the offices of lawmakers who later charged with crimes.

And there are worse things than reinventing yourself in a government funding crisis. That would be doing nothing.

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