Panel Discusses Recommendations of Indiana Commission on Local Government Reform

Brian Dixon, Laura Littlepage

The Indiana Chapter of ASPA recently hosted a panel discussion on the recommendations of the Indiana Commission on Local Government Reform. The event featured two individuals involved with the Commission and two representatives from local government advocacy groups.

In December 2007, the Commission released its first public report that outlined its recommendations for transforming local government in the State of Indiana. The report recommends 27 changes that would significantly alter cities, towns, townships, counties, libraries and schools.

Because the changes are dramatic, many Indiana politicians, citizens, and public administration professionals are skeptical that they can be achieved. Others argue that not all of the changes are necessary, and some feel that a few of the changes will not keep Indiana moving forward into the future. The report and details on the Commission can be found at http://indianalocalgovernmentreform.iu.edu/index.html.

John Krauss, director of the Indiana University Center for Urban Policy and the Environment, hosts of the event, kicked off the panel with background information on the Commission and the report. The Center was charged by Indiana’s Governor to provide the Commission with research and support services.

According to Krauss, Governor Daniels chose the co-chairs of the panel, former Governor Joe Kernan and current Indiana Supreme Court Justice Randall Shepard, because he felt they could be impartial and “above politics.” He also knew that both men were deeply involved in local government before working at the state level. Krauss also described the methodology used by the Center to gather research and public input for the Commission’s deliberations and final recommendations.

Louis Mahern, immediate past president of the Indianapolis Marion County Public Library Board of Trustees and a member of the Commission, was the second speaker. Mahern provided insight into some of the decision-making processes involved in the Commission’s final recommendations. He said the Commission was able to put politics aside and focus on key changes to local government for increased accountability, transparency and efficiency.

Mahern also said that the Commission steered away from discussion on financial projections (e.g., how much will this save taxpayers?) and concentrated on known facts. For example, Indiana has more than 2,700 local units of government authorized to levy property taxes. Instead of focusing on tax savings from merging local units, the Commission described its recommendation from the point of view that fewer taxing authorities creates a more transparent and less complex system of local government. This has resonated well with policymakers and citizens.

The Commission’s report outlines several major changes, something many feel will be difficult in a state like Indiana where change is not usually embraced. Some of the changes recommended include:

- Consolidate county legislative functions into a single body;
- Eliminate three member county executive boards in favor of a single county chief executive;
- Transfer child welfare funding from the counties to the state;
- Eliminate township government and transfer authority to the county executive;
- Reorganize county library systems to create economies of scale; and
- Reorganize school districts to achieve a minimum student population of 2,000.

These recommendations have been met with some resistance from taxpayer and government advocacy groups. Groups that represent township government have fought to help their members keep their jobs.

However, many advocacy and taxpayer groups have embraced the report, although some remain skeptical about how quickly state legislators will enact the recommendations. In his remarks, Mahern commented that the role of Commission members has transitioned to that of advocacy since releasing its report. He said the members knew these changes would be difficult to enact, but they view them as critical to the future of Indiana government.

Rhonda Cook, director of Government Affairs and Legislative Counsel for the Indiana Association of Cities and Towns, and David Bottorff, executive director of the Association of Indiana Counties, were the final two speakers.

Both speakers highlighted legislation passed by the Indiana General Assembly during its most recent, short session relevant to the Commission’s report. They...
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The keynote speaker was Stephen Goldsmith, the Daniel Paul Professor of Government and director of the Innovations in American Government Program at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. He is also the chair of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Goldsmith received the conference’s Exemplary Public Service Award. Conference participants included practitioners in city and county government, UCF faculty members and students and nonprofit administrators. The four panels comprised city and county leaders, UCF, FSU and Arizona State University faculty members, and the Urban Academies Program of Broward County, 2006 winner of the Innovation in American Government Award. Participants commented that the conference was one of the best they had attended and provided a great networking opportunity. They also said they appreciated the convenience and comfort of the venue.

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shared how the general theme of the report was embraced by many state legislators, and that several recommendations made their way into legislation this year. One example is the elimination of township assessors for townships with less than 15,000 parcels (House Enrolled Act 1001, 2008). Although the legislation contains other provisions, the main provision of the bill upholds a key tenant of the Commission’s report—better accountability through the elimination of superfluous layers of government.

An additional piece of legislation provides for the consolidation of local government emergency communication systems. House Enrolled Act 1204 (2008) limits the number of Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) to two, and it encourages existing PSAP operators that exceed the new maximum to form intergovernmental agreements with neighboring governments. According to Cook and Bottorff, this legislation directly corresponds with the Commission’s recommendation to consolidate emergency public safety dispatch and upholds a key goal—to make local government more efficient by sharing resources.

Feedback from the session was overwhelmingly positive. Attendees and panel members alike support the principles of the report, even though not everyone in attendance agrees with all of the recommendations. Krauss pointed out that several of the recommendations have been on the legislature’s to-do list for more than 100 years, but there is a renewed optimism that the recommendations in the modern report can help set a new course for local government in Indiana. The aim is greater accountability, transparency and efficiency. This will be achievable if state policymakers and local government stakeholders cooperate with the same determination and open-mindedness as the members of the Commission.

As public administration professionals, the Indiana Chapter of ASPA looks forward to playing a role in the transition. As public administration researchers, the Indiana Chapter of ASPA sees the Commission’s recommendations as an opportunity to observe change, examine the process of change, and evaluate the outcomes of such a bold challenge for a state. We feel the recommendations are achievable, even if they can’t be adopted at a rapid pace. Change is hard. However, like death and taxes, change is inevitable, and in Indiana it is greatly needed for improved, sustainable government.

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Details and event materials can be found on the chapter’s website, http://www.aspaoonline.org/indiana.