

CHAPTER TEN: ILLINOIS LOCAL GOVERNMENT

By Gary Koch

To a casual observer, local government in Illinois is a myriad of authoritative bodies crisscrossing each other over geographical, political, ideological and sometimes imaginary boundaries. In a weak moment, even veteran local officials may agree with this assessment.

According to 1999 - 2000 statistics from the State Comptroller, there are 7,277 local governments in Illinois, about 1,300 more than in the next closest state, Pennsylvania. This figure includes some overlapping, however, and this translates into roughly 75,000 elected or appointed officials in Illinois, or one official for every 160 citizens.

What exactly is a local government and why are there so many of them? In 1969, the Illinois Commission on Urban Area Government define a local government in Illinois as follows:

1. An artificial body created by the state. It administers and regulates local concerns of the population living in the area embraced within its corporate limits in matters particular to that place and not common to the state or any other government.
2. Performs duties not strictly local – serving as an involuntary political and civil subdivision of the state to deal with administration of matters too tedious for the state.
3. Owns and maintains properties and provides services for a fee.¹

Local governments provide four basic functions: regulatory, service, political and corporate. Regulatory functions are those duties that help a government maintain order among its citizens. They can include police and fire protection, planning and zoning, building construction, animal and pollution control, health regulations and licensing of businesses and trades.

Services are provided to citizens because they are either unable or unwilling to furnish them for themselves. They can include public libraries, parks, playgrounds, garbage collection and disposal, public welfare, cultural activities and weed and insect control. Services provided on a fee basis can include water supply, sewage disposal, public housing, hospitals, health care, recreational facilities and cemeteries.

As a creature of the state, local government serves as a political jurisdiction, a “grouping,” if you will, for other levels of government such as congressional, legislative and judicial districts, and allows for the election of officials to serve at the other levels of government.

In its corporate role, a local government can enter into contracts, hire (and fire) employees, buy and sell property, sue and be sued.

There are several reasons for the quantity of local governments we are blessed with in Illinois. Historically, our early settlers were an independent lot and because of geography, climate and growing seasons, communities sprung up all over the state.

Because of a 5% debt limit for local governments imposed by the 1870 State Constitution, it was advantageous to create a new governmental unit to perform each local function. Thus we have everything from park districts to mosquito abatement districts to airport authorities.

Local government, in most people’s minds, works. For years surveys have shown that people trust and get the best return on their tax dollars from local government. Citizens feel closest to local government – they often know their officials on a first-name basis, whereas they generally have little or no contact with state and federal officials.

There are five basic types of local government in Illinois—county, municipal, township, school district and special district. Each type of government fulfills specific needs and provides special services to its citizens even though its boundaries may overlap or be contained within other

governments.

The 102 counties in Illinois differ widely in size and population. They do, however, provide similar functions, including:

- performing fiscal duties such as approving budgets, appropriating funds, levying taxes and borrowing money;
- administering justice;
- Maintaining public records, such as birth certificates, deeds, wills and mortgages;
- Providing law encodement;
- administering elections;
- constructing and maintaining secondary roads and bridges; and
- providing assistance to the elderly, poor, blind and dependent children.

Two thirds of Americans live in municipalities. Among the 1,287 municipalities in Illinois are cities, villages and incorporated towns. They can range in size from the Village of Time with 36 residents to Chicago with 2.8 million citizens. Municipal government is largely services-oriented. While not required by statute, municipalities have streets, provide police and fire protections, maintain parks, build hospitals and administer traffic control because people want or need those services.

One hundred forty years before the American Revolution, township government was established in this country. Today it continues to be a strong, viable form of local government. Illinois' 11433 townships have three major responsibilities:

- Administering general assistance programs;

- Constructing and maintaining roads and bridges in unincorporated areas; and
- Performing property assessments.

Additionally, townships can provide maintenance of sewer and water systems and social services for children, the poor and elderly.

Special districts are the most common type of local government in Illinois (there are 3068). They are limited to one or a few functions. They are usually created because of

1. A need for a special service which no existing government is able to fulfill or is currently providing;
2. willingness on the part of a geographic area to pay for service it wants or needs; or
3. desire to evade restrictions on taxing or borrowing power.

Finally, school districts, like the other local governments in Illinois, are not uniform in size or population. Created by the legislature, the 896 school districts are administrative agents of the state designed specifically to establish public elementary and secondary schools for students within a specific geographic area.

Local governments in Illinois receive most of their revenue from property taxes. According to 1990 Census Bureau figures, Illinois local governments received \$11.1 billion in total tax revenue in 1989-90. Property tax revenues of \$8.4 billion accounted for three-fourths of local tax revenue. Local sales tax of \$1.5 billion amounted to 13% of tax revenues.² Local officials today are faced with three overriding concerns:

1. People want more for their tax dollar. In other words, they want increased and better service – timely garbage pick-up, clean streets, reduced crime, a safe environment, etc.
2. Citizens, however, do not want to pay more for services.

3. The standard has been raised. Technology has created a demand for instant access to and response from government. Citizens now expect a 24/7 approach to their needs instead of government being available only during regular business hours.

Additionally, many local officials are part-time employees of their government. They may earn their living from another job. They have few, if any professional staff, limited resources, more fiscal demands than they can meet, and continually face a somewhat distrusting public. Government service can be a difficult job even under the best of circumstances.

Compounding the problem is the fact that many officials fear dealing with the media. They claim reporters often do not tell the “whole story” or that reporters do not always take the time to thoroughly research a story or get the necessary background information. Others complain that some reporters are distrustful of anything coming from government officials.

To bridge this gap, a reporter covering local government should develop a working knowledge of the subject matter. Attend some city council or county board meetings before you write a story. Try to develop a working relationship with elected and appointed officials.

Go out of your way to be trustworthy and fair. Improved two-way communication will provide long-term benefits to you, your employer, the local governments in your community and the public.

NOTES

1. The Structure of Local Government of Illinois (Springfield Illinois Commission on Urban Area Government, 1969), pp. 6-8.
2. State and Local Government Revenue and Expenditure by Level and Type of Government, by State: 1989-99 (U.S. Bureau of the Census; 1900).

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