

Recently, the chair of the County Board brought up an interesting reform idea. I welcomed his interest but suggested that instead of just sticking a toe in the pool of reform – we should jump right in. I believe that now is the time to take the plunge and pursue true reform.

Companies all over are re-examining their business models during these economically challenging times. They are making decisions to operate more efficiently and effectively - now and in the future.

At a time when many in the private sector are implementing major reforms, it seems logical for leaders in the public sector to ask the simple question: “Do we really need all of these layers of government?”

Here in Wisconsin, Milwaukee County is the only county that is comprised entirely of incorporated land. Every part of the county is a city or village.

So, do we really need county government?

Early in 2008, we started work on a plan to eliminate the extra layer of government. Local business and civic leader Sheldon Lubar asked a similar question last spring when speaking at the downtown Rotary Club.

We shared our outline with Lubar and numerous other business and civic leaders. Since then, the Greater Milwaukee Committee commissioned a series of studies to examine the details of such an idea. That report should be released later this year.

In my opinion, consolidating county government into other levels of government is an idea whose time has come.

Here is an overview of how the change can work:

Human Services: One of the largest functions of county government is in the area of human services. Nearly all of these programs are mandated by the state and provided with state and federal funding. Without county government, those programs (and the funds attached to them) could go back to the state.

Eliminating an extra layer of administrative costs would mean that more resources would go to supporting older adults, people with disabilities and others in need within our community.

Criminal Justice: Currently, the county government provides a part of the funding for the state courts system. Without county government, state aid

(currently sent to the county) could go back to the state to fund the criminal justice system.

Transportation: The airport already operates without any tax levy and could continue to function well without a county government. The existing sales tax (not a new one) could be used to fund the bus transit system operations on a regional basis – all without a county government.

Cities and villages already host county roads through their communities. State funding for these roads could go directly to municipal governments if there wasn't a county government.

Cultural Attractions: For years, many have advocated the creation of an independent and elected parks district to run our cultural attractions. Illinois, Minnesota, California and Ohio are all states with these districts. The parks and zoo could exist without county government (and without the drain of pensions and state mandates).

Millions alone could be saved from removing another layer of overhead—plus the elimination of all of the additional elected officials and their offices. Specifically, that would mean the end of the County Executive and the County Board.

While I may be the only elected official in the state advocating for a plan that would eliminate my job, I think we must be dedicated to finding new ways to better serve the people. That is what leadership is all about.

We have a unique opportunity to change a system that is out-dated and inefficient. We must think seriously about those we serve and the services we provide to the people within our communities. Now is the time to put the interests of the people ahead of the wants of the government.