

Government Consolidation

Originally aired on Nebraska ETV Program Statewide (11-5-04)

All material (c) 2004 Nebraska Educational Telecommunications, Lincoln, Nebraska

(Intro) Throughout the state, many smaller, local races were much less contentious. In fact, you likely voted on some with just one candidate. One reason? Nebraska has a lot of local government. We rank among the top 10 states in the number of government entities per capita. "Statewide's" Mike Tobias examines the issue and what some entities are doing about it.

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) A lot of information comes through this room. Tax documents, criminal records, fire department information, and much more. This operation also supports 24 hundred PCs and a fiber optic network connecting about 30 buildings. All this for two separate government entities - the City of Lincoln and Lancaster County. The combined information services operation saves both governments several hundred thousand dollars a year.

(Doug Thomas/City-County Information Services Manager) You're not having to have duplicate hardware, duplicate networks, duplicate support staff, and also by being a joint agency, if there's a new project being developed on one half of the government, and there's something similar on the other side, we're aware of that because we work with both entities. So we'd like to think that there's some efficiencies through that was well. Certainly of all the major cities this is the only one I'm aware of within Nebraska that's that way. And I think it's kind of a national model.

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) The merger happened a couple decades ago through an interlocal agreement between the city and county - essentially a contract to share specific resources. Lincoln and Lancaster County have about 45 interlocals. Everything from a shared county-city building and jail, to combined health and aging departments. It all saves both government entities about 5 million a year.

(Don Herz/Lincoln City Finance Director) I think these interlocals came about primarily because Lincoln and Lancaster County have always worked generally in the same office building and 90 percent of the citizens of the county actually are in the City of Lincoln. So I think that's just facilitate the interlocal agreements that we've got now.

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) Interlocal agreements are a way Nebraska governments are working together...without fully consolidating. Lincoln and Lancaster County have been a leader in this movement...which is growing statewide. A year ago Lincoln Senator DiAnna Schimek led a Legislative study of government efficiency. This included an extensive survey of Nebraska's cities and counties.

(Sen. DiAnna Schimek/Lincoln) Probably the most interesting figure in the whole thing was the 98 percent of the counties and 80 percent of the municipalities report that they have done interlocal agreements. That's a pretty big number and pretty astonishing.

(Lynn Rex/Exec. Dir., League of Nebraska Municipalities) What you see now are more interlocal agreements on paper that are basically codifying and putting on paper what was

already done. But there's also I think just an increasing willingness and also a need for folks budget wise and in every other way to find ways in which they can work together and save money. And perform services better. For example, more and more cities are deciding that in fact law enforcement as one of the more expensive public services can be better provided if they partner with the county.

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) The interest in interlocals makes sense, given the volume of government in Nebraska - 93 counties... 532 cities and villages... 455 townships...501 school districts...and hundreds of irrigation districts, utility districts, NRDs and other entities. The reasons are many. Our unique public power system. A large number of school districts. Maybe even an independent nature that makes us value local control of our lives and money. Whatever the reason, Schimek says having so much government does cause problems - especially in some rural areas.

(Sen. DiAnna Schimek/Lincoln) They don't have enough people pay enough taxes to support either city government or county government. And so not only in terms of the infrastructure needed like a county courthouse, for instance, but having the number of employees to do all these different functions.

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) While interlocals are a popular solution, the Legislature's study showed that there's still resistance to consolidating services...and even more resistance to full-scale consolidation or merger.

(Sen. DiAnna Schimek/Lincoln) Resistance among people living in those local areas. Resistance among the elected officials themselves.

(Lynn Rex/Exec. Dir., League of Nebraska Municipalities) What Nebraskans, what we as Nebraskans say we want only applies if it's someone else's government, but certainly we don't want to see our city necessarily merge with our county. We don't care if somebody else's city merges with their county, but we don't want to see our city merge or our village merge.

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) Rex, though, says the amount of government in Nebraska isn't necessarily a bad thing...and merger or consolidation should not be mandated.

(Lynn Rex/Exec. Dir., League of Nebraska Municipalities) Our league feels very strongly in representing the 532 cities and villages that each city and village has the right to vote and make their own determination. Do they want to participate or not? They should not be forced by a larger city or a larger entity any more than the city ought to be by a county to merge or to do something that their citizens don't want to do because it's all about local control for us and we believe in that.

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) If a full merger would occur...it would most likely happen in a place like Lancaster County - where the city dominates the county's population. It's happened nationally in Indianapolis and a few other places. Herz says it's been discussed in Lincoln - where he says city and county government is already about 20 percent consolidated through interlocal agreements.

(Don Herz/Lincoln City Finance Director) There's a good possibility. I don't know that it will happen soon, but I know that there's been discussions. I haven't been directly involved in those, but there's certainly been some discussion by the public officials and there's certainly that chance.

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) Consolidation hasn't always been easy for Lincoln and Lancaster County. But they've been able to make it work well enough that government entities throughout the country are now turning to them for advice on consolidating areas like information services. Reporting for Statewide, I'm Mike Tobias.

Originally aired on Nebraska ETV Program Statewide (11-5-04)

All material (c) 2004 Nebraska Educational Telecommunications, Lincoln, Nebraska