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Reorganize government for today's Iowa

The Register's editorial

Fewer farmhouses rise among the fields, and many Main Streets boast little more than a post office, reflecting the painful demographic and economic changes that have rolled over much of rural Iowa in recent decades.

As a result, it's inevitable that government - schools, cities, counties, courts and the state - eventually must be reorganized to reflect those changes. In addition, today's information and logistics technology offers the possibility of streamlining services still delivered by government systems originally set up to accommodate horse-and-buggy driving distances.

The only real question is when reorganization will come.

Will it happen sooner, to make the best use of limited public resources, or later, not only wasting taxpayers' money but in the process hurting the quality of, say, the education or justice that Iowans receive?

The global economic crisis has punched a hole in state revenues for 2009, 2010 and perhaps beyond. Declining revenues make a strong case for moving faster to do what needs to be done. It's an example of crisis presenting opportunity - to reshape government to better serve today's Iowa.

Gov. Chet Culver and leaders in the Legislature owe it to the people of Iowa to take the political risks necessary to seize this opportunity.

Iowans tend to resist upsetting the status quo, which can be a strength. But that tendency also can stop progress when it's needed most - sometimes for a very long time.

In 1933, as the Depression staggered the nation's economy, the state hired the Brookings Institution to study Iowa government. The Washington think tank's recommendations included merging 99 counties into 25. Iowa, of course, still has 99 counties.

Rethinking Iowa's government is needed everywhere, not just in the areas of rural Iowa with declining populations. There's plenty of inefficiency in cities and suburbs, too. Schools especially stick out on this count.

Just look at the Des Moines metro area. The Des Moines school district is the largest by far, surrounded by perhaps a dozen smaller districts, depending on how far out the circle is drawn. Why couldn't districts share business-office functions, such as payroll, among other things?

The goal should be saving money where it's reasonable, to allow putting more money where it makes the most difference, such as raising salaries to help districts hire and keep great teachers.

Nowhere is that more important than in rural Iowa, where teachers earn far less than their colleagues in large communities. Ask any rural superintendent, and he or she will tell you how much the applicant pool has shrunk, especially for openings in math and science.

Other examples where reorganization might save money, improve services or both:

- The Iowa court system has recognized reality by cutting back on the presence of full-time judges in

some rural counties. But legislators have blocked the court system from taking further steps to consolidate services - even though that could provide better service in the long run to all users of the system.

- Would it make sense to merge the Glenwood and Woodward resource centers, which serve individuals with severe physical and mental disabilities? In addition, the state has four mental-health institutions - each more than 100 years old and serving small populations. Should they be combined? The Iowa Department of Human Services maintains 99 county offices, though some are part-time. The counties pay to maintain the offices, but the staff are state workers. Is 99 the right number for efficient, effective service?

- County governments, whether or not consolidated from the current 99, could be an ideal vehicle for local consolidation of city and even school functions, but that would require a change in state law. Their charters limit the range of services they can deliver.

The point is that Iowa has to start looking to the future when it comes to government organization, rather than staying stuck in the past. The governor and key legislators should spearhead a reorganization commission once the 2009 General Assembly adjourns, aimed at developing recommendations for adoption in the 2010 session.

Culver and legislative leaders from both parties - people like Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal and House Speaker Pat Murphy, and House Minority Leader Kraig Paulsen and Senate Minority Leader Paul McKinley - need to put their brainpower and political muscle into the effort.

Now, more than ever, Iowans need leaders who will step forward, brave the inevitable short-term pushback and develop a more workable system of government that will serve Iowans' best interests in the long run.
