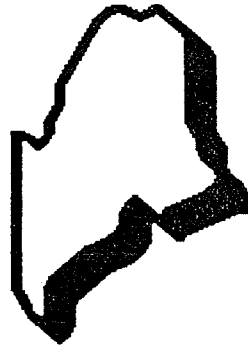


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**SUMMARY
REPORT
of the
COMMISSION TO EVALUATE
COUNTY/REGIONAL GOVERNMENT
to the
CUMBERLAND COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

October 1992

1940

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REPORT OF THE COMMISSION TO EVALUATE COUNTY/REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

SUMMARY

THE CITIZENS OF CUMBERLAND COUNTY FACE A COMPLEX AND CHALLENGING FUTURE WITH A GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE WHICH HAS REMAINED ESSENTIALLY UNCHANGED SINCE 1820.

That statement is fact, problem, and opportunity, all at once.

Fact: The structure of State, municipal, and county government has remained essentially unchanged since statehood.

Problem: More and more power and control have accrued to State government as new problems have appeared, because regional and local governments have neither the authority nor the access to resources to deal with them. Government has moved ever further from the people, because no alternatives have been available. Functions and services that should be guided by state-wide policy but administered according to regional or local circumstances instead are controlled by State-wide mandates and implemented by centralized agencies. More and more ad hoc mechanisms have been created to deal with local problems that are regional in scope. Costs of government continue to rise faster than the citizens' perception of value received from government. These costs fall almost entirely on the property tax, which continues to rise inexorably.

Opportunity: As more people become aware of the regional nature of many problems affecting the quality of life in our community, they want to solve more problems systematically. Frustration with the structure and costs of government encourages citizens to consider re-forming government to make it more effective and efficient.

In response, the Cumberland County Commissioners appointed the Commission to Evaluate County/Regional Government and charged it to examine County government and to make recommendations for change. This report satisfies their charge and points the way to a better future. When the recommendations of this Commission have been adopted, citizens will benefit from more effective, more efficient government.

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

The broad goals of this Commission have been to:

- ✓ **Improve the capacity of our region to address problems and opportunities that require or benefit from governmental action.**
- ✓ **Strengthen local control, that is, the ability of citizens to influence the actions of government that affect their lives.**
- ✓ **Increase the value of government, that is, increase the ratio of benefit to cost by improving services and/or reducing costs.**

We propose major substantive recommendations to achieve those goals:

- ✓ **Re-form and strengthen the functional responsibilities of regional governance.**

Give it the authority and resources to manage functions that are regional in nature, including transportation, economic development, some aspects of environmental protection, human care, regional review of local comprehensive plans, waste-water management, water supply management, and emergency planning. Some of these functions should be delegated by the State to the regional level. On the other hand, the State should assume the County's current responsibility for jails.

- ✓ **Make the structure of County government more representative.**

Increase the number of Commissioners to twelve, thereby enlarging the opportunity for community leadership. Elect a regional executive so the citizens can decide which vision of County government they prefer. Hire professional department managers to improve efficiency.

- ✓ **Lower local property taxes by shifting tax resources from the State to the region and from the region to municipalities.**

Secure a change in State law to allow County sales taxes at the option of the citizens. Then ask the citizens in referendum to fund County services through a half-cent tax on covered sales in the County. The County should reduce by 50% the funds it receives from municipal property taxes and in addition should share enough sales tax revenue with municipalities so that the municipalities receive more than they pay in for property taxes.

We propose three process steps for action by the County Commissioners:

- ✓ **Conduct hearings** around the County to communicate the work of this Commission and to gain reactions and additional ideas.
- ✓ **Establish a Charter Commission** to begin the work of improving the effectiveness of County Government.
- ✓ **Seek legal advice concerning changes in state law required to make the changes we propose.**

GOVERNMENT RE-FORMATION: ANOTHER LEVEL OF ACTION

Another key recommendation:

Cumberland County Commissioners should lead a thoughtful and meaningful dialog among the citizens and leaders of our County, its municipalities and the State as a whole, about how best to re-form government, especially County government.

Although our charge was to examine County government only, the levels of government in Maine are so intertwined that no one of them can be made more effective without changing the other two. The dialog led by the Commissioners should use the recommendations in this report for Cumberland County as the basis for discussion and idea generation with County and municipal officials from around the State.

Re-forming government means considering:

- **Functional boundaries:**

Locate each function or service at the level(s) of government that offer the best mix of effectiveness and efficiency.

- **Geographic boundaries:**

Re-define county boundaries on the basis of regional affinity, economic relationships, and work/live patterns, so that government best meets the needs of the governed. Change the number of counties, if appropriate. Consider changes in municipal boundaries, to reflect changes in population, needs for services, and efficiencies

- **Financial boundaries:**

Finance each level of government with a mix of tax sources and fees that is appropriate in size, controllable by the taxpayers, and flexible enough to adopt to changing circumstances.

- **Organizational boundaries:**

Organize State government in all three branches to achieve maximum value from government. Organize County government not only for effective service delivery but also to increase representation and encourage community leadership. Delegate authority and the resources to exercise it from the State to the regional and local levels whenever delegation can be done without endangering the success of policies and programs.

Many of the changes we suggest will require changes in State Law. Those changes will not be easy to obtain; but the effort must be made.

WHY WE MAKE THESE RECOMMENDATIONS

In two years of study we learned much:

- Most citizens do not understand what County government does or even why it exists.
- County government is the least representative of all forms: each of three Commissioners represents more than ten times as many people as a State representative. Most citizens do not know who their Commissioner is.
- County government lacks the authority and resources to be effective.
- Within Cumberland County, differences in population density and citizen needs, as well as geographical distances, mean that many areas of the County have little in common with others.
- The largest function of County government is operating a jail, followed by police work and preservation of legal records.
- Many functions currently performed at the state level, and some now at the municipal level, would be more effective and efficient if they were operated at the regional level.
- Ad hoc regional mechanisms often lack the ability to coordinate and balance competing public interests. Moreover, citizens do not know who represents them in these groups.
- "Local control" must be re-defined to mean "control at the level of government closest to the citizens which has the capability of addressing the issue at hand."
- Although it may take time, only a thorough re-formation of government to fit current and future needs will restore citizen confidence in the ability of government to solve problems and provide value at least equal to the cost of government to the tax payers.

These findings compelled us to recommend systematic actions to change and revitalize our regional governance.

We particularly recommend reading Appendix B to understand how the Commission approached its task.