

GUEST COLUMN

CHAMBER THREATENS LOCAL CONTROL

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The latest offering in what appears to be a continuing series of proposals to “change the way we govern ourselves” comes from Ohio’s Metropolitan Chambers of Commerce and the Ohio Chamber of Commerce. This one carries the ambitious title “Redesigning Ohio: Transforming Government into a 21st Century Institution”.

The common themes to these “studies” are that (1) the state is facing a fiscal crisis, and (2) we should take this opportunity to transform our state and local governments. The Chamber’s report is no exception with the usual buzzwords: “getting more for less”, “building a strong state economy that can compete in the 21st century” and “our state government must become more flexible, adaptable and innovative”.

Once you get past the lofty rhetoric you find little more than warmed over and previously rejected “wish lists” and left over big government schemes.

Among the specifics: they suggest eliminating the 10% and 2 ½% property tax rollbacks. These state-funded rollbacks were a trade-off for passing the State income tax in the ‘70s and then increasing it in the 80s. Now they want to treat it as a “gift”. They propose cutting back the Local Government Fund which will impact basic services (police, fire and roads) provided by cities, villages and townships.

The Personal Property reimbursement has entered a phase-down period. In this case, the State eliminated our local Personal Property income resource, replaced it with the Commercial Activity Tax, and then pulled the revenue to the State level with eventually nothing to replace it with on the local end.

They discuss reducing or eliminating the Homestead property tax exemption for senior citizens. One of their suggestions is to “means test” on an income basis. There is no provision for the resources necessary to collect that information and update it every year. Ironically, after a high labor transition period, the program has just settled into an easier to administer format. Now they want to change it back.

They actually want to create new agencies and pay them to be the master manipulators of how local governments are funded and operated. They advocate strongly for pushing decision making downstream and then, in a strange twist of logic, also advocate for centralizing power by basically starving local units out of business. Such loss of local control would be devastating to the voters ability to hold government accountable.

They say that State taxes are not the problem compared to the rest of the country, but that local taxes are too high. Perhaps that is because the State has not shouldered their share of the cost of delivering services which forces local governments to go to the voters to seek to raise the necessary funding locally.

The problem with this and other similar “studies” is that they distract us from seriously dealing with the fiscal problems and offer the false hope that fiddling with the time-tested structures of government will be some kind of “silver bullet” to fix the mess.

In fact, consolidation and creating bigger entities seldom results in better service, improved efficiency or savings. What it does is move government further away from the people.

Our problems today are the result of excessive spending by politicians who over committed finite resources and unresponsive bureaucracies that acted as though they were beyond reproach. Weak political leadership that could not say “no” to the next big project, favored program or idealistic editorial board is largely responsible for our collective situation.

Let’s stop wasting time getting starry-eyed over glossy reports, “ivory tower” studies and complicated proposals. Taxpayers want results, not thinly disguised efforts to diminish local control and consolidate authority in bigger government.