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1 message

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Panels to study cutting Ill. gov'ts

By KEVIN P. CRAVER - kcraver@nwherald.com
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If you think it's a miracle that the property tax bill you received this week doesn't unfold to the floor with all the local governments you pay into, you're not alone.

Efforts by some state lawmakers to consolidate the state's more than 7,000 units of government have failed in the General Assembly. But bills that take a more nuanced approach by creating commissions to investigate how to pare them down are moving forward.

House Bill 268, which passed both houses Tuesday and is awaiting Gov. Pat Quinn's signature, would create a 17-member commission to investigate reducing governments providing redundant and overlapping services. A separate bill seeks to create a commission to focus on ways to consolidate the state's 868 school districts.

"Our government has just gotten too unwieldy," said state Rep. Jack Franks, D-Marengo, who drafted House Bill 268. "We have more than 7,000 taxing bodies, and this is a way that people can weigh in and get rid of the duplication."

From school districts and townships to more eclectic bodies such as mosquito abatement and cemetery districts, Illinois by far has the most units of governments of any state – the first runner-up, Pennsylvania, has about 4,900. While opponents of consolidation equate local government with local control, critics allege that the sheer number makes them impossible to watch for waste, fraud and abuse.

The proposed commissions follow several high-profile bills, unpopular with the interest groups representing the bodies in question, that took a direct approach.

The Senate this month defeated a bill by Sen. Terry Link, D-Waukegan, to create an eight-member commission with binding authority to eliminate local governments. A bill by Rep. Robert Rita, D-Blue Island, to force consolidating all school districts into one district for each county is languishing in committee, as are two Senate bills aimed at abolishing township road districts based on the number of miles of roads they maintain.

But some, such as McHenry County Board Chairman Ken Koehler, R-Crystal Lake, are concerned about the unintended consequences of consolidation. The services of abolished governments, he said, would

have to be passed on at cost to other governments.

"In many cases, there could be an increased cost to local governments," Koehler said.

The proposed commissions would bring representatives of the governments to the table and would not have any binding authority.

Five members of Franks' government commission would be selected by Quinn from associations representing counties, municipalities, townships and park districts, with the fifth an elected official from an unrelated body. The remaining dozen would be General Assembly members, selected equally by the Senate President, House Speaker, and minority leaders from both houses.

Franks said his bill did not include school districts so as not to conflict with the school consolidation commission being developed. His commission would have until the end of the year to submit its report to the governor.

The 20 members of the proposed school commission would include representatives from urban and rural districts, teachers organizations, parent groups, administrators and other education interests. House Bill 1216, drafted by Rep. Linda Chapa La Via, D-Aurora, passed both houses but is awaiting concurrence on a Senate amendment.

Ironically, the amendment appoints a representative of the state's regional school superintendents as the 20th member, signaling that Quinn's desire to consolidate governments by eliminating the 47 regional superintendent districts statewide likely will not be successful.

Franks rejected the idea that commissions made up of the bodies targeted for reduction would be unable to develop an objective and meaningful plan. Voter anger over government cost and size, he said, will resonate louder with lawmakers than local government lobbying groups.

"I think people are fed up with government. They're fed up with the size and the ineffectiveness of government, and we're going to have real people make real suggestions that are common sense," Franks said.

On the Net

To read the text of House Bill 268, which would create a Local Government Consolidation Commission, visit <http://shawurl.com/16e>.

To read the text of House Bill 1216, which would create the School District Realignment and Consolidation Commission, visit <http://shawurl.com/16f>.

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