

REFORM INTENTIONS

Richmond, Wayne County Officials Seek Efficiency

By Charlee Beasor



Discussing government efficiency efforts in Richmond and Wayne County are (from left) Bill Quigg, Amy Holthouse, Jon Ford, Sally Hutton, Dave Fulton and Ken Paust.

Business leaders make decisions every day to streamline operations, shore up the bottom line, control wasteful spending and increase productivity.

Unfortunately, governments can't always adhere to the same positive steps – whether it's being steeped in the tradition of "the way things are done" or because their hands are tied by outdated laws and regulations.

One group of local government officials, in response to dwindling revenue and the need to provide more effective services, has determined a growing need to find efficiencies and to save money.

The city of Richmond, Wayne County and the Wayne County Area Chamber of Commerce came together to form a Joint Commission on City-County Government in 2012 to examine governmental processes at the local level. Richmond Mayor Sally Hutton and Wayne County Commissioner Ken Paust, along with the chamber, each appointed five representatives to the commission.

Commission co-chairs were retired businessman Jon Ford, and Dave Fulton, former chancellor of Indiana University East.

Amy Holthouse, current president of the local chamber, was not involved in the commission, but recalls Ford's summary of how the members worked together toward a common goal.

"Jon had shared at the first meeting that those three groups of five immediately decided, 'We're not representing anyone but the county as a whole,'" she recalls. "The group had decided, 'We're not city, county or chamber. We're one.' I think that was the driving force of how successful (the commission was)."

Status update

The commission completed its work in the first six months of 2012. It examined areas such as human resources, information technology, maintenance, planning and zoning, public safety, purchasing, and streets and roads.

Recommendations in the final report included:

- Create a city and a county administrator position to handle more day-to-day operations
- Adjust expensive benefits for elected officials: particularly, health coverage for spouses, full health insurance coverage for employees (and their dependents) who retire after 20 years and costly retirement plans
- Establish a universal paid time off policy for the city and county human resources offices
- Increase staffing of the IT department
- Use one time and attendance record-keeping system for the city, instead of multiple systems for different departments
- Review a two-mile zone overseen by the city that causes confusion in zoning and permitting processes

Fast forward to 2014. Of the recommendations, the



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most progress has been made on the move to use just one time and attendance system for the city, as well as consolidating vacation, sick and personal time to a universal paid time off plan.

“We’re making strides and if you’ll recall, government moves very slowly and business is used to making a decision and (the business) puts it into effect this afternoon or tomorrow morning. We’ve made progress on a lot of fronts, and Sally and I may be gone long before some of these things. If you don’t start, you never have an opportunity to accomplish it,” Paust shares.

Bill Quigg, president of the Richmond Baking Company and chairman of the chamber’s issues and advocacy committee, has been tasked with ensuring the report “isn’t just dust on the shelf.”

“Can we find some really low-hanging fruit so we can get some successes? I want a press release that says, ‘Look at the great thing the government did to save this and create this efficiency that we didn’t have before,’” Quigg affirms. “Once we do that, the bigger issues, let’s try to tackle them.”

Initial public reaction included questioning the recommendation to spend money to hire more employees. The city’s IT department is understaffed and the commission suggested hiring at least one technician and one support person.

“The county and the city both eliminated many, many jobs and it’s starting to take its toll. One of the interesting things that came out of the report . . . we need more employees to make it more efficient,” Hutton asserts.

Glaring differences

Fulton highlighted a major point he gleaned from participation in the commission: a culture of cost efficiency simply doesn’t exist in government.

“Maybe that’s putting it too harshly. But

the point is that supervisors were very good at seeing projects through and accomplished. That was a very positive thing,” he notes. “But the problems were there was not particular attention getting paid to ways in which efficiencies could be improved; (this is) not rewarded or incentivized in the government.”

With it being illegal to give bonuses or incentives to government employees for their work, one commission recommendation was to put emphasis on the expectation of employees and department managers to come up with ways to be more efficient and cut costs. This includes training for officials with administrative responsibilities.

None of the commission members were elected officials. With the inclusion of the chamber’s representatives, there was an emphasis on business-like decision making.

“I think having the business perspective has been a positive thing on the commission itself, balanced equally with the frustration of not being able to move fast enough,” Quigg asserts. “We want to work with the people that can actually make the change. We want to be a little bit of a spur in the saddle, but in doing that we understand that things have to move appropriately.”

Handcuffed by state law

All agree that due to burdensome regulations and laws at the state level, several of the commission’s recommendations could be a long time coming.

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As an example, one state statute that causes a layer of confusion is the two-mile “fringe” outside of city limits that is under the

city’s planning and zoning command. The zone slows down permitting processes, and planning and zoning needs.

More complex is the county government structure in Indiana. The city and county don’t have unified management structures, the report notes, and therefore the “governmental structures are unwieldy and do not easily lend themselves to effective and efficient management practices.”

At the county level, for example, the Indiana Constitution calls for 11 separately-elected offices including the auditor, treasurer, recorder, clerk, etc., as well as the election of a three-member board of commissioners and a seven-member county council. The county council handles the fiscal role, while the board of commissioners is responsible for the executive and legislative functions.

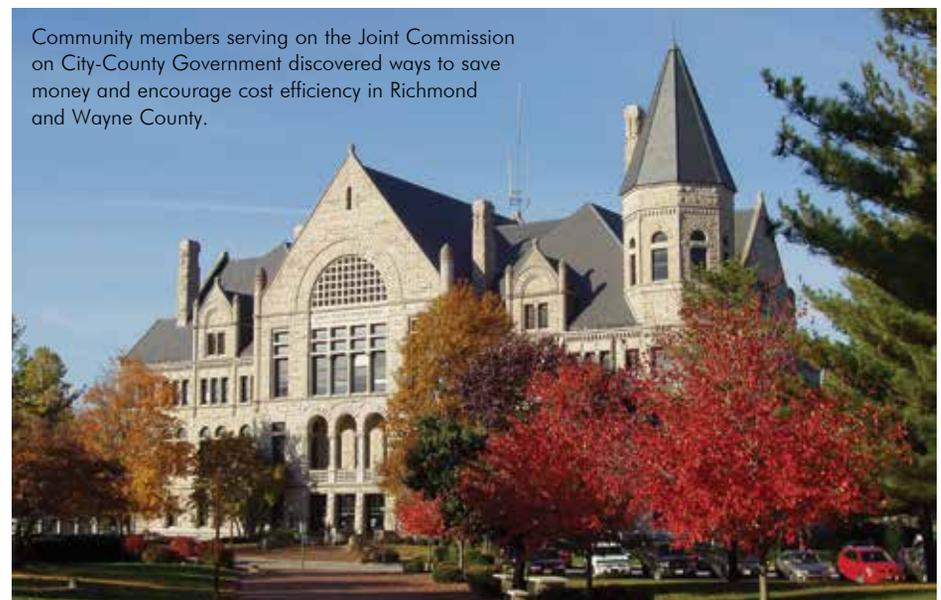
The 2007 Indiana Commission on Local Government Reform (Kernan-Shepard commission) report outlined that Indiana is the only state that divides these duties between the two elected bodies. That report recommended hiring a county executive, doing away with the county commissioners and appointing many of the 11 elected offices.

One of the larger-scale recommendations made by the commission was to hire a city and a county manager. Ford explains the decision to call for those added positions.

“The mayor has more of a typical line organization. When you see that organization chart, how much stuff that is for one person to take care of, this is a bigger job than one person. The city manager would be more delegated to that type of organization; it’s a position that would be valuable to the city,” he shares.

Due to state law, however, Richmond’s

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Community members serving on the Joint Commission on City-County Government discovered ways to save money and encourage cost efficiency in Richmond and Wayne County.

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classification as a second-class city (due to population) keeps that recommendation grounded.

“You can have a city manager in a first-class city and a city manager in a third-class city and not one in a second-class city. That’s one thing we intend to talk to lawmakers about,” Fulton acknowledges.

As for the county manager, having someone to supervise the county departments could be beneficial.

“Theoretically, all the departments report to the commissioners, but they (commissioners) all have full-time jobs. There is not one full-time employee in charge of the county,” Ford offers. “The day-by-day, minute-by-minute problems, challenges, supervisions – there just needs to be someone in charge of that.”

The commission’s recommendation for a county manager wouldn’t replace the county commissioners. According to the county’s attorney, there is no statutory authority to create such a manager position – only an administrator who wouldn’t possess any additional power above the commissioners. That move would essentially extend the horizontal management structure of the county.

It is a recommendation that has been indefinitely tabled, according to a November 2013 update of the report.

What’s the magic formula?

While it seems that progress is slow, the conversations going on in Richmond and Wayne County are notable.

“There is a high level of expectation for excellence, and I think the people that have been involved all adhere to that,” Holthouse observes.

“At times there are disagreements, but the end goal of making this a better place always takes precedence. ... I’ve been in communities where these people wouldn’t even sit at the table together.”

Paust agrees that the personalities at play are making these discussions happen.

“It’s people. It’s those folks that are willing to work together and when you get elected, you forge, whether you’re a Republican, Libertarian or Democrat, you work together to what’s good for the community,” he shares.

Future plans

Updating all of those outdated, cumbersome laws is Ford’s dream for the community’s future.

“I’d like to see the state address the antiquated laws and regulations that hold counties and townships back. Somewhere along the line you need to address that. Back to the history of townships, those laws go back 100 years,” he asserts.

“The other thing would be more risk-taking, not worrying about getting re-elected, but make a good decision.”

Focusing on a culture of efficiency in government is necessary, Quigg says.

“Leadership groups coordinating and collaborating – as much of an efficiency culture shift, more from a position-to-position basis, whether that’s the two street departments talking together or the IT departments doing bulk purchases. That’s where I hope those efficiencies are thought about and brought about and created, from those positions,” he concludes.

RESOURCES: City of Richmond at www.richmondindiana.gov | Wayne County government at co.wayne.in.us | Wayne County Area Chamber of Commerce at wcareachamber.org