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- Neil Karl
: When this subject comes up, I think of what happened in Canada. About 1966 Ottawa and/or the provinces...

By [John Bebow](#) - June 17, 2010

Michigan citizens want efficient local government. And, to get there, they don't much care which town name is plastered on the sides of the police and fire engines. We heard that sentiment time and again in the 585 Community Conversations leading to our newly released "[10,000 Voices](#)" report.

The Michigan Legislature can help local governments manage their budgets by removing longstanding laws — like Act 312 — that stand in the way of service consolidation and, according to some economists, artificially inflate labor costs and take budget management out of the hands of local officials. Some in the legislature claim that a bill moving through both chambers — [SB 1072](#) — is a "reform" of Act 312. The Michigan Municipal League and guest columnist Jeff Jenks, the mayor pro tem of Huntington Woods, claim SB 1072 is a hollow bill that does nothing to reform Act 312 and instead actually strengthens some of Act 312's inefficient provisions. [Here's more from Ann Arbor City Manager Roger Fraser.](#)

Other stirrings in Lansing could actually prove more beneficial to local government efficiency. State Rep. Marie Donigan, D-Royal Oak, is pushing [HB 5930](#) that would create a new state office charged with providing technical assistance and tools, including state-financed bonds, to push local governments to combine and consolidate services. The bipartisan Legislative Commission on Government Efficiency, which also has been shouting from the rooftops about combining local government services, likes Donigan's approach.

So, if you hear incumbents on the campaign trail this year bragging about how they've "reformed" Act 312, don't believe it. Instead, ask them what they think of Donigan's plan or whether they have better ideas of their own to assure taxpayers get maximum efficiency in local services delivery.

Now, for that guest column...

By Jeff Jenks
 Mayor Pro Tem, City of Huntington Woods
 President of the Board of Directors, Michigan Municipal League

While local units of government struggle under revenue sharing cuts and declining property tax revenue, many in Lansing and around the state talk about "cost-saving reforms."

Unfortunately, there's little actual reform, despite strong efforts by members of the Michigan Municipal League to encourage the Legislature to help cities hold down costs. One of the best examples: Reform of PA 312 of 1969, a law that requires binding arbitration for labor disputes between communities and public safety officers. MML is strongly supportive of a key

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reform that would require an arbitrator consider first and foremost whether a community has the ability to pay an award and a clear definition of exactly what ability to pay means.

Earlier this year state Sen. Randy Richardville (R-Monroe), generated much excitement when he introduced SB 1072, a bill amending PA 312. In the 41 years since PA 312 was passed, there has been no substantive reform despite decades of decisions that have crippled communities and forced layoffs of many police officers and firefighters.

That excitement quickly turned to disappointment as SB 1072 passed the Senate in a watered down version that not only fails to help local units of government control costs, but actually expands PA 312 to include— public safety authorities, dispatch authorities, and the like. Instead of reforming a law that has been broken for nearly half a century, the Senate decided to just make some tweaks around the edges and expand it.

Now the House Labor Committee is taking up SB 1072. It appears this non-reform reform is being fast tracked, with an "agreement" among labor to get this thing done. MML, the organization that represents our communities, has been pushing for PA 312 reform as a critical piece of keeping officers on the streets and has been left out of the "agreement."

If SB 1072 as currently written passes the House and is sent to the Governor, it will be a shame. Once again, the Michigan Legislature will have shirked its duty to provide real reform and has taken the easy route instead of protecting our taxpayers. Make no mistake, passage of this law will mean fewer police and firefighters on the job, as cities will be forced to pay higher wages and benefits to a reduced number of employees in those areas. The Legislature may claim it passed reforms, but nothing will be further from the truth. This impotent bill does nothing to benefit taxpayers or lower the cost of government. Next year when municipalities are still laying off public safety officers, the League will be back before the legislature imploring them to require an arbitrator to consider first and foremost a defined ability to pay.

Michigan has lost more than 2,400 firefighters and 2,000 police officers since 2001, largely because of revenue sharing cuts, declining property values and PA 312. How unsafe do our streets have to become before we start talking about REAL reform?

This entry was written by [John Bebow](#) and posted on at 9:30 am and filed under [Fresh Thoughts](#), [Government Collaboration](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Follow any comments here with the [RSS feed for this post](#). [Post a comment](#).

ONE COMMENT

1. Neil Karl
 Posted June 18, 2010 at 1:03 pm | [Permalink](#)

 When this subject comes up, I think of what happened in Canada. About 1966 Ottawa and/or the provinces recognized this problem and passed legislation to force consolidation of all qualifying cities and towns into metropolitan districts. That is, a city and surrounding suburbs were dissolved and combined into one metropolitan city. The metropolitan city boundary often would be out in farm country.

 If Michigan enacted such a law, all the cities and towns of Wayne County would be incorporated into the

Metropolitan City of Detroit-Wayne. Similar consolidations would apply for Oakland and other applicable counties. There would be a drastic reduction in government costs for all departments. The same would apply to school districts. The former suburban district boundaries would be metropolitan voting districts. The new technologies of radio communications, computers, and the Internet would create great efficiencies in the metropolitan governments.

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