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Honey, I shrunk the government

We need more leadership from Harrisburg in efforts to consolidate schools and municipalities.

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Oct 22, 2006 — This year, the state Legislature will see turnover that's unprecedented in recent times, creating an opportunity for positive change. Are your state legislators prepared to lead the way? Next week, in our endorsements, we'll offer suggestions on the best candidates to help "reconstitute Pennsylvania." Meanwhile, as you prepare to vote Nov. 7, keep the following government reform issues in mind:

Right-size school districts and local government:

Why: Pennsylvania has 501 school districts and 2,565 municipalities. York County has 16 districts and 72 municipalities. People say they like the local control, but how many can name even one school board or borough council member? The problem in Pennsylvania is that these folks, many of whom are unpaid volunteers, are charged with complex duties such as land-use decisions, taxation and other issues they're often ill-equipped to handle.

Wouldn't it make sense to consolidate these functions at a more regional level? Eric Menzer, who co-chairs the Metro York committee of YorkCounts, thinks so. But his group doesn't want to force municipal consolidation - instead looking for voluntary cooperation. Ideally, though, he'd allow the municipalities to remain, but move some of their functions to the county or regional levels. "They can be in charge of playgrounds. Let them argue about mulch - but not major regional issues," he says.

Similarly, is it efficient to have 16 one-high-school districts in the county? Wouldn't it make sense to have just a few - or perhaps six to eight? Might that not allow for some equalization of the wide range of per-pupil spending in the county? Would a magnet school system allow for a better distribution of low-income students - rather than having them all clumped in the city?

These are questions a countywide education summit organized by YorkCounts, today and Friday, might help answer. But we need lawmakers with the guts to question the status quo and really take the lead on this issue.

Why not: Because this is the way it's always been done. But that's not good enough any more.

How: State Rep. Steve Nickol, R-Hanover, says the governing bodies of two or more municipalities can put mergers on the ballot for voter approval - and residents can bypass local elected officials and initiate such referendums themselves. School districts can merge by a majority vote of the school boards with no need for voter approval. "I would support also giving residents of two or more school districts the power to initiate such referendums," says Nickol.

So would we. But we'd prefer a constitutional amendment that completely reinvents the way our "commonwealth" works.

Strengthen open records/sunshine laws.

Why: Despite a revision a few years ago, Pennsylvania still has one of the weakest open records laws in the nation. A survey conducted by 51 news organizations (including the Daily Record/Sunday News) last year found that school districts, municipalities and district justice offices routinely denied access to records that are clearly defined as public. Some of the more high-profile cases of public records that have been withheld recently include Joe Paterno's salary, which Penn State contends is confidential (though your local high school principal's salary is not), and expense records for a state student loan agency's board retreats at posh resorts.

The Pennsylvania Newspaper Association is pushing for reform in conjunction with this year's election, urging candidates to pledge support for a "Brighter Pennsylvania." The proposal includes tougher penalties for agencies that withhold public information - and an enforcement bureau at the state level.

Why not: Law enforcement agencies say open records laws could jeopardize criminal investigations and further victimize victims. But those records can be easily exempted.

Also, some say problems typically arise in small boroughs and townships where clerks simply don't know the law. J.P. Kurish, a

Democrat running for the 28th Senate District, makes an excellent point when he says we need "yearly seminars to bring together state officials with media representatives and legislators to educate local officials about . . . compliance with the law."

How: The Legislature has the power to shine more light - and it should start by fully applying the open records law to itself and the judiciary.

Post legislative votes and expenses online.

Why: Sure, you can check out your lawmakers' voting records online. But try it sometime. Go to <http://www.legis.state.pa.us> and try to find your state rep's vote on, say, the 2005 pay raise. Be prepared to spend hours sorting through a tangled Web mess.

We can do better. Put all the votes online within 24 to 48 hours. And do it in a simple, easily searchable manner. Check out the Vermont Legislature's Web site at <http://www.leg.state.vt.us> for a pretty good model.

Why not: That would be inconvenient for lawmakers. But transparency can go a long way toward restoring public trust.

How: Simple legislation or resolutions could tackle this one.