

STAX
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Enough time, money have been wasted

It's been six years since the Indiana Chamber of Commerce released the Indiana Project for Efficient Local Government; a report intended to spur positive public policy changes at that level. It's been nearly 2 1/2 years since the Kernan-Shepard panel identified 27 local government areas ripe for improvement and millions of dollars in savings.

Yet when you look at the past decade — apart from the 2008 legislation to eliminate township assessors in non-urban areas — the Indiana General Assembly on the whole has opted to turn a blind eye to this issue. But ignoring it has only made things worse.

This spring when lawmakers once again failed to deliver meaningful local government reform, they did so knowing full well that countless other government units were severely strapped for cash.

Your legislators instead chose to let rarely used township gov-



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ernment stay the course and sit on reserves that have grown to \$263 million in taxpayer dollars. In today's economy, that's irresponsible and obscene, especially when the following is occurring:

» Far too many Hoosiers are unemployed and could have sorely used some of the local taxes they paid that are not being used.

» Reports continue to come in from around the state about schools laying off teachers to deal with their shrinking funds.

» Library systems are hurting. The Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library is being forced to slash its operating budget and six branches are on the chopping block.

And for those who seek a summer retreat, public swimming pools will be opening later in the season and closing earlier in many locations. What's the next widely used public service to go? Let's hope it's not public safety.

But thank goodness townships have their big tax stash. You use their services all the time, right?

Do you even know what services they provide? If you don't, you're in the substantial majority.

But hoarding cash isn't the only township government talent; basic incompetence is also recognized:

» In Indianapolis, the Washington Township trustee elected to spend \$20,000 to fight a lawsuit instead of simply paying the \$758.27 to a woman denied poor relief.

» Many townships spend significantly more in administrative costs related to poor relief than the actual aid itself.

» A breakdown in procedure in a Fort Wayne township resulted in no 2010 budget approved, employees not getting paid and services not provided.

We also really don't know what township officials are doing with our money in many cases. In 2009, the majority of the townships either filed late or not at all their legally required disclosure reports to the Indiana State Board of Ac-

counts. For all we know, more of them could be using the funds for their personal use like a former township trustee in Evansville who was arrested last week. Linda Kaye Durham is charged with theft and official misconduct, accused of

spending \$13,000 of taxpayer dollars paying for her own bills, attend concerts; etc.

Township offices that practice rampant nepotism, spend far too much in administrative costs and even use your tax dollars to pad trustees' own pockets are not in anyone's best interests. Not to mention, basic township functions of poor relief and fire protection can be done much

more efficiently at the county level.

Legislators are supposed to represent you, not the townships. Don't ignore the alarm that's getting louder and louder. It's time for Hoosiers to wake up and hold their legislators accountable.

★ Brinegar is president of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce.

The Indiana General Assembly on the whole has opted to turn a blind eye to local government reform. But ignoring it has only made things worse.