



**Indiana Commission on Local Government Reform  
Summary of Gary Public Forum: October 8, 2007**

The compiled responses below were provided to the Indiana Commission on Local Government Reform by approximately 200 citizens at the public forum held in Gary at Indiana University Northwest on October 8, 2007. Comments were recorded by a member of each table (small group). In cases when similar responses were recorded by multiple tables, these responses are marked with the number of tables providing the response. Written comments submitted at the event have been recorded with other individual submissions taken by web, e-mail, and regular mail.

**Please talk briefly about the local governments and local government services or functions you have accessed or interacted with over the last year.**

- Library (6 tables)
- Police (5 tables)
- BMV (5 tables)
- Schools (5 tables)
- Township trustee (4 tables)
- Tax assessors (4 tables)
- County assessor (2 tables)
- Fire (2 tables)
- Health department (2 tables)
- County council (2 tables)
- Local development offices (2 tables)
- School board (2 tables)
- Sheriff (2 tables)
- Infrastructure (2 tables)
- Bus system and other programs for disabilities and had trouble finding help
- Ambulance
- ISPS
- State police
- Parks
- Roads and transportation
- Clerk's office
- Treasurer's office
- Gary sanitary district
- Garbage
- Recycling
- Street sanitation
- Animal control
- Planning departments



- Local websites—Lake County government website, ordinances for Merrillville, City of Crown Point, Child Protective Services
- Property tax
- Department of Local Government and Finance
- Regional Development Authority
- County auditor
- City council

**What local government services are most critical to the success of your community and your family? To maintaining a healthy local economy and good quality of life?**

- Schools/education (15 tables)
  - Education—Indianapolis: we need your help
  - Closings, meshing, charter schools and abandoned schools
- Police/public safety (10 tables)
- Fire (8 tables)
- Bus company/public transportation (6 tables)
- Intraregional transportation
- Transportation planning (including pedestrian safety tables)
- Libraries (5 tables)
  - Different interest in different areas; urban libraries have different concerns than more rural areas
- Parks and recreation (3 tables)
- Healthcare; health care access; preventative health care (3 tables)
- Hospitals (2 tables)
- Tax assessment (2 tables)
- Township assessing
- Good infrastructure/street department (3 tables)
- Garbage/sanitation (4 tables)
- Small business development/Chamber of Commerce (2 tables)
- Medicare
- Sanitation
- Law
- Water
- Environmental planning
- City service
- Health department
- Transportation issues
- Welfare/public aid/food Stamp office
- Food pantries
- Mental health
- Child Protective Services
- License bureau



- Access to grocery stores/shopping
- Teenager/youth activities
- Baseball stadium built
- Environment—go green
- Seems like the purpose of reform is to reduce local government
- Local government doesn't do local assessing
- Quality EMS. These are the point of government—to provide things we can't provide for ourselves
- Compliance officers—do they even exist?
- Have needed to call police services and have been satisfied with response
- Fire department has worked with the children to educate on fire safety and meeting needs very well in Chesterton
- BMV in Gary and Valparaiso—good experience
- Good experience with police and fire at B.P. refinery
- Police and public safety
- Water supply is an important quality of life issue
- School system—major impact on community—central focus
- Know when to make important decisions to upgrade infrastructure to keep up with growth

### **What can be done to modernize and streamline local governments and the services they provide?**

- Eliminate overlapping/duplication of services (11 tables)
- Streamline administration with use of technology, more Internet resources —“less paper,” increase accessibility to budgets and public information (10 tables)
  - Addition of technology will be expensive in the short-run but will be beneficial in the long-run
  - Success will require educating the public. Internet and phone are intimidating. Some people will continue to need face to face contact, especially the elderly (2 tables)
  - This would add transparency
  - It should make available public finances, employment opportunities, contracts, meeting minutes
  - Pay bills online such as water
- Less outsourcing of government contracts/services; companies are not held accountable and the focus moves from serving the people to making a profit; loss of local control over contracted services leading to lower salaries for local citizens who previously held those jobs (7 tables)
- Public transportation (6 tables)
- One size does not fit all. Needs in one local government are different than others (5 tables)
  - Urban vs. rural issues; maybe county by county decisions
- Eliminate township government; township trustee position (5 tables)
  - Streamline to county level



- Divide into county regions
- Need effort to fight political patronage (4 tables)
- Too much money on school administration/front office (4 tables)
- Evaluate policies before implementation (4 tables)
- Money should be used more efficiently (3 tables)
- Don't consolidate libraries. It won't save money. Would lose programs and jobs if consolidate. Cost of writing information systems would outweigh savings. No representation at local levels. (3 tables)
  - Services for children and adults provide internet services for free
- Consolidate schools (3 tables)
  - There are 15 school districts—they could be combined and overhauled.
- Transfer care of children and indigent to the state because some areas over burdened with paying for the poor (3 tables)
- Consolidating libraries may save money, but would not streamline government because it would eliminate services, compromise efficiency and service (3 tables)
- Centralization of practices and procedures; uniform guidelines (3 tables)
- Waste in school/education funding, particularly in light of educational outcomes! (3 tables)
  - Close high schools and open magnet schools
  - Career tracks
- Regional Councils; "Super Council" (2 tables)
- Privatize government functions (2 tables)
  - Examples: BMV, child support & services, toll roads
- Make sure employees are efficient (2 tables)
- Consolidate school buildings; buildings are now empty but paying utilities (2 tables)
  - Why so many in elementary schools?
- Don't blame local government for problems that go all the way to state level (2 tables)
- Reduce waste (2 tables)
- How many entry points do we need for social services? Consolidation (2 tables)
- Establish a statewide health insurance program for all state civil servants for more affordable coverage (2 tables)
- We need a public database of policies and budgets with open and timely access (2 tables)
- Need to tally and limit the extraneous stuff purchased by county and township: gas cards, cars, phones (2 tables)
- Why do we build new schools? Seems like a lot of money in buildings. (2 tables)
- Insulated structure of "school city." Right size salaries that are robbing children of the resources they deserve: Reduce salaries of all Gary school city employees to no more than the teachers' pay schedule. Same pay for administrators as a teacher, with same degree and seniority. Teachers moving into administration jobs, open positions for enthusiastic (and lower paid) new teachers (2 tables)



- Does every property owner pay some type of minimum tax? So many churches are getting nonprofit status and buying up lots. The residents are paying the taxes because churches do not pay taxes (2 tables)
- Local control (2 tables)
- Issues with Gary schools (2 tables)
  - Should allow vouchers
- Eliminate BMV branches
- Contracting out procedures: we need more transparency, not just the lowest bidder; enables poor/shoddy work
- In Gary, the mayor has established a job search position, but that position already exists at township, and we have the unemployment agency.
- Integration is okay for regional municipalities
- Have a streamlined complex in each local community that has everything that would be needed
- Does each community need a fire and police department? Munster and Highland decided “no.”
- County services can be very fragmented. EMS, snow services creates chaos. One unit should be responsible for emergency services.
- People in assessor’s office should have a finance background
- Public officials need to be educated
- Clarify job descriptions to ensure quality public servants
  - Possible group purchasing between special districts for major purchases. Good example is schools purchasing gas, school supplies, etc.
- Term limits. We need to eliminate professional politicians.
  - It only takes one year to learn the process; if they can pay attention at meetings they will learn quickly
  - This is not the same as having the job and doing it day to day
- Certain states have implemented term limits. Maybe don’t have time to learn how things work until the end of their term.
- Difficult to weigh issues for growing school systems vs. declining ones
  - Class issue. Gary and East Chicago are being left far behind. We need to say “No City Left Behind!”
  - This could be a difference in parental participation
  - Vouchers will not solve problems
  - Why would someone want to pay taxes on something that is failing?
- Creation of shared/universal computer programs amongst the assessor, auditor, and clerk’s offices will benefit the county (share capabilities)
- Schools are receiving most of the tax dollars
- Too much is spent on school buildings
- Need more money for teachers
- No Child Left Behind was a BIG mistake
- Who gives up power?
- Is there a benefit associated with the enhancement of services?



- Uni-government a possibility to streamline
- How should education be funded other than the use of property taxes? How about a sales tax?
- Clean up overstuffed agencies: streamline upper staff employees, assistants, secretaries; eliminate over-staffed middle management
- If we consolidate libraries by county, will funds be distributed fairly? Are library services going to be cut or diminished?
- Statewide consolidation of services such as 211 social services/crisis line can provide benefits regarding funding, advertisement/marketing, and implementation
- Simplify government structure
- We need to change the structure of county government
- More oversight of agencies that deliver services; speed up government service delivery (poor relief)
- Be more innovative
- Combining school corporations and libraries—is this a good idea?
- Too much erosion in education system
- Consulting— is this necessary? We will make the same choices eventually, but won't have to pay as much.
- Sometimes consulting is very beneficial because it is too political in local government. It creates checks and balances. Depends, though, on how the firm is chosen
- Fraud; services are not the problem, but people running them.
- Voter fraud
- Run government as a business
- Consolidate townships and counties and county seats
- Results oriented retention for employees
- Hire more people
- Cross-training among employees
- Need government turnover. Students of government can't get government jobs because people don't leave their offices.
- Nowhere in the country are public officials required to be educated; it would be dangerous to require education
- There is a lack of standards in current government
- Why can't we have LOCAL REFERENDUMS on elected school boards? If the issue is local it should be decided by local referendum
- Suggest form to post ideas that others can add ideas, at certain level it would go well
- Hard to have centralized call center because so many street names are the same— errors can be made. This could work in small communities.
- Local people should run the local programs
- There are mutual aid programs in public safety—police/fire/EMT
- Cooperate on training
- Need higher wages for government employees
- School budget needs to be streamlined
- More public awareness—who holds public figures accountable?



- Public outreach on any issues affecting our communities
- Restructure Lake County in urban and rural sections: use local mayors as council members in interim
- Problem is that local government doesn't work together
- Centralize services
- What about a mobile bus, can we set up those health services at a community center?
- Establishment of a Lake County Business Council to recruit new, light manufacturing companies
- More transparency in local governments
- Streamline the permit process for new businesses
- Eliminate the local assessors' offices
- Clear out the Lake County Commissioners for refusing to take a proactive approach to streamlining local government
- Combining of resources among county and city government entities but no privatization
- Reform and restructuring of local government threatens to eliminate taxation with representation
- Clearer path of enforcement for violations
- New taxes should be implemented over time
- Improve training for teachers/educators
- Nonprofit liaisons for clients
- Better interaction of services with county coordination
- Add more caseworkers
- Motivation programs need better support from management
- Better involvement by citizens
- If consolidation results in closing of branches, there is no transportation system to take elderly, disabled, etc. to central office
- Go green with environment such as that in the city of Chicago
- Development/redevelopment to provide balance within communities so that all citizens can walk/use transportation
- Fewer restrictions on what can be taken by garbage/sanitation
- Pollution control, more public officers that are "environmentally aware" and will be attentive to land use
- Don't consolidate health services
- No beverage tax, no wheel tax
- How do we pull together?
- Park department: We have to look at ways to cut cost. Taxes continue to go up. Soon will not be a viable place to live.
- We need to streamline how many people can be in township government
- We need to set a time limit on how long can someone be in township government
- Local government tends to be efficient. It is easy to keep track of what's going on.
- Ramifications of government changing to private sector, i.e. paramedics.
- We need a robust business community



- Assessors should be local because they have knowledge of the area
- We need one county commissioner, not three
- Make sure that work done at higher levels such as county levels should benefit local communities
- There is a fine line between streamlining and taking the “personal touch” out of the process
- Streamlining compounds ineffective city leaders, isolating citizens
- Accountability is key
- Keep trustee when there is major need
- Local should develop Internet more
- Need to consolidate juveniles with courts and with welfare
- Reentry of incarcerated juveniles should be connected with the schools
- Waste/inefficiency: what are the priorities? Unnecessary bureaucracy.
- Use money more efficiently (applies to government as a whole)
- Uncertainty associated with budgets; increases dependent on new council
- Positive solution: citizens need to get more involved and vote
- The state should push for pre-school instead of full day kindergarten
- Curriculum needs to be changed and modernized in terms of life courses
- Schools mirror cities, counties, and townships in terms of nepotism and corruption
- It should be pretty simple to reduce cost per local government (city and town reduce cost by 1 percent). It must start with the mayor and schools. We should follow the good government report
- Too much government: counties should have more control over money
- East Chicago school cities have serious problems; allow vouchers
- Everyone has an agenda
- Let's adopt Illinois' system of majority vote in spring then a run-off.
- We do need business incubators. This will bring jobs and industry to the area.
- Redundancy of positions?
- Shared resources in a more integrated municipality
- Need more social service workers
- We need better customer service
- At county level, we have an elected assessor and surveyor. There is no easy chain of command like we have at the city level.
- Make jobs available to poor people
- Make tax for school come from one base from state
- The State Legislature should re-codify the local government legislation and rules to eliminate duplication
- Establish a county level business development council that recruits light industry for economic development
- Look at countywide and statewide programs such as insurance purchasing programs to gain economics of scale for purchasing services
- Cut funding for civil servants: police/fire; emergency services; public works



- Township are cost effective—very small percentage of tax dollars
  - President of local food pantry has worked with the township trustee—on referral basis—this worked well
- Parents aren't involved enough
- In favor of consolidating some services
- Too much consolidation will lack representation, lose identity
- Community involvement = a more successful community
- Most feel that consolidation will have long term negative effects
- Companies should be required to provide health insurance
- Government health insurance for students and others should be provided
- Improve customer services. Example: Storm clean-up in the city
- Change means testing; redefine numbers necessary for acceptance to services
- Better community meetings: create better understanding for or of official roles of elected officials
- Standards for local officials— certifications/credentials/background checks
- The library system that we have works very well. It's doing a wonderful job. Why change it?
- Bigger is not necessarily better
- Watch budgets and be accountable for construction projects
- My lot was reassessed at 311 percent increase over last year—should at least be phased in, but is ridiculous to have this only North of Oak Avenue in the Miller part of Gary
- Ratio of students to teachers is too great
- Eliminating jobs in a job weak market adds to unemployment
- Inspectors should come from an outside source
- Citizens should not pay for construction of private services (e.g., Gary Airport/ Air show)
- Increase taxes to help pay for healthcare
- State Board of Accounts needs to audit without destroying township government
- Cities need affordable activities available for youth
- City infrastructure should be maintained/fixed
- Can we recommend that we leave the structure the same?
- More public health care in certain areas
- Perhaps people do not understand what consolidation means; perhaps it will be beneficial
- What are the advantages of township government?
- Who knows the needs of the township better than the people who live there?
- Develop the lakefront
- Values begin at home. We need to educate our young mothers and start the retraining from the womb.
- There are concerns over using casino funds for “pet projects” rather than community benefits
- Use more ethanol



**What do you think has the biggest impact — negative or positive — on the ability of local governments to deliver services efficiently and effectively?**

Positive

- Libraries are adapting to what people want; adapting from books to CDs
- Internet available

Negative

- Apathy, complacency, and ignorance: those who don't know and those who don't care (6 tables)
- Government corruption; "I'd rather have a very serious garbage collector than a thief in elected office;"lack of professionalism and integrity (4 tables)
- Poor communication between services: Police, ambulance, hospital, etc. (3 tables)
- Mistrust as a result of too much patronage and corruption; reputation of government in this region is bad—i.e., corruption, no involvement of young people, accountability (3 tables)
- We need to hire the best people for the job, not based on nepotism or patronage; People in power hand out orders, but do not know their job (2 tables)
- Young people need to vote (2 tables)
- Funding (2 tables)
- Poor leadership (2 tables)
- Assessor's office making too many errors .They don't follow Department of Local Government Finance rules. We are either being lied to or people are misinformed and don't know the difference. (2 tables)
- There is no accountability (2 tables)
- Low voter turnout
- Unresponsiveness. A prime example: we applied for a building permit, we followed the channels, it went to city council, but so far we haven't received a letter in the mail. It is frustration after frustration.
- Too much fighting
- Lack of accessibility; part-time officials, and so the only way to get a hold of them is to attend the public meetings
- Tax delay is exacerbated by the upcoming elections. They don't want to hand out tax bills before elections
- Department of Local Government Finance is reason why taxes are delayed. They didn't receive report until July. Certified budgets are behind; it is not the local governments.
- Libraries with stagnant budgets face rising library salaries and healthcare for employees and as a result are not losing services
- Nepotism and cronyism
- Poor leadership
- Qualified people require resources to make progress



- Taxing policy is having a negative impact—businesses are no longer paying taxes—the responsibility has been shifted to the homeowner, primarily caused by *state* tax policy
- Local government is blamed for property tax problems
- When looking at problems in Lake County, if you look at most local governments the problems are because of lack of transparency
- Politics—infighting between two parties keeps things from getting done
- There are no two-party systems in the Region. No elections are challenged.
- Laws—local vs. federal distinctions
- Governor is trying to cut out home rule
- Cost of welfare and criminal justice
- Government reported negatively in the media
- When the government is too large it is inefficient—it needs to be streamlined
- Indiana is 49<sup>th</sup> in the country for tax collection for local government
- Leaders need to come to some agreement
- People do not want to move to community where the service is terrible or where schools are terrible
- Porter County's rising population has put a burden on local services, re: license bureau, schools have had to add, and shortage of teachers
- Lower income areas have less tax base to provide services, especially for schools
- Some communities have improvements only during election years
- Reallocation of funds
- Politicians do what it takes to get in office, and nothing more
- All we hear about local government is how to raise taxes
- The libraries, statewide, are only responsible for 3 percent of state taxes. The problem with libraries is that they are prone to political pressure if they become part of the tax reforms.
- Change in the Government Head causes lax/ hostile communication
- Assessment system is unfair
- Bureaucracy
- The state legislatures don't understand how the local governments work
- The short session of the legislature are not long enough to deal with all the bills
- County government is too large
- Tax abatement has hurt local governments
- Costs more to send child through K-12 education in East Chicago than to IU or Purdue
- Library under utilized
- There is inefficiency, and the prevailing notion of always passing the blame to someone else or some other agency
- Garbage services are not functioning. People who work in local government do not show the citizens any respect. There is apparently a lack of communication between the social services and Indianapolis.
- The people who work in public services have a very bad attitude
- Is local government responsive?



- Police department is not only inefficient, it is also corrupt. Same with the housing department.
- Public transportation is thinking of downsizing. What would the indigent people do?
- Tax burden is being transferred to the homeowner from businesses
- County government is unhelpful except in Assessor's Office
- Budgets between communities in the south of county are 25 percent of the budgets in northern county even though they serve the same numbers
- Most people in the group feel that the problem lies more at the state level and not with the local governments
- Most people that get involved in politics do so for personal reasons; attitudes change once you enter office
- Libraries' incomes are capped
- Some of the property tax problems are due to the fact that property owners can't be identified
- Unions defending incompetent public servants, hindering the ability of local government to provide quality services; Unions have supervisors who remain in the union ranks. (2 tables)

**Considering the discussion this evening, what are your top three recommendations for reforming the structure and/or function of local government?**

- Increase accountability of public officials by creating standards or certification requirements, credentials, and also by decreasing the number of elected officials and transforming these into positions for hire (3 tables)
- Region-wide streamlining of services through implementation of (updated) technology (3 tables)
- Do not consolidate libraries (3 tables)
- Stop the duplication of services (3 tables)
- Eliminate fraud, waste and patronage (2 tables)
- More community involvement (2 tables)
- Analyze government functions/agencies: look at each individual department separately to find inefficiencies (2 tables)
- Transparency/accessibility/open governments (2 tables)
- We need to hold our officials accountable (2 tables)
- Reevaluate exemption for property taxes. We would like to see a minimum tax for entities that pay little or no taxes. (2 tables)
- Public transportation (2 tables)
- Focus on school systems (2 tables)
- Consolidate layers of government (2 tables) Eliminate county and township assessors' offices; save money by eliminating some offices (2 tables)
- Integrating Northwest Indiana's citizens' resources, municipalities, communities, and schools, and environment (2 tables)
- Need a financial watchdog function (2 tables)



- We need one county commissioner, not three, because it is an executive position. We need to change the structure of county government, as we work on improving accountability and reduce expenses.
- Consider consolidation of services within the county, but maintain local autonomy
- We have good government initiative report, which is basically gathering dust; we need to review that and choose what will work for us
- We need to accept change in government. Work with other states to see how they solved some issues.
- Too much crime/corruption
- Reconsider loss of inventory tax More school funding address poorly paid teachers, provide better preparation; address closing/combining/overcrowding
- Consolidate mental health services
- Consolidate non-essentials such as parks department
- Consolidate water and sanitation departments
- Streamlining of administration on all levels and give money to the other doers
- Regional streamlining of services
- Education requirements of candidates
- Good quality leaders: Revive inefficient government leadership
- More efficient spending: Eliminate financial waste
- Quit hiring the yo-yos without strings to run schools
- Gradual consolidation
- Address funding of schools salaries that affect students. Reduce salaries of all Gary school city employees to no more than the teachers' pay schedule; Same pay for administrators as a teacher, with same degree and seniority; especially by teachers moving into these administration jobs, opening positions for enthusiastic (and lower paid) new teachers
- Watch where tax revenue from casinos, steel mills and BP oil is going
- Audit education
- Standardize administrative procedures across towns, townships, counties. For example, same software
- Recall those elected officials who are not doing their job. You can't be an elected official and have another job.
- Be careful of what is judged as "non-essential." Look at individual rather than making a blanket statement.
- Can we give up some things to get lower taxes?
- Address inefficiencies
- Cut federal and state government costs
- Don't allow local school districts to overbuild
- Implement and carefully consider the recommendations that are given tonight
- More education
- Invest in a regional master plan
- Reducing number of elected positions to positions for hire—more professionals in county positions



- Put services together to be more efficient
- Trim government—restructure government
- Need to find a way to deal with bureaucracy, less expense and better service. We need to practice cross-training for employees' job descriptions, and better customer service.
- State collects school property tax
- Provide more Internet access to government service
- Any reform should take into account demographic economics and resources for local government entities
- More effective to allow township assessors/trustees to exist and maintain taxation with representation, allowing public accessibility to these entities
- Recommend schools/libraries be restructured allowing county to control resources and how funds are being spent to better evenly distribute services
- Eliminate township government
- Informed and accountable electorate
- Term limits for all elected officials
- Enforce current laws
- Abolish property taxes
- Public safety issues
- Wasted funds
- More youth programs
- Local government spending
- Strongly challenge the assumption that consolidating government branches (i.e., school and libraries) will produce an adequate quality of life or save enough money
- The legislature needs to take time to consider what they need to do to make necessary changes. Don't rush this through in four months. Consider legislative and institutional implications.
- Reduce the budget
- Create equal and fair property tax assessments
- Everyone should put in something, including nonprofits. Except for churches.
- More frequent state audits
- Financial accounting for all government levels
- Reexamine what local governments are doing to attract businesses, bringing industry to defray costs
- Need to explore more equitable state revenue sharing from state's contracting efforts (ex: toll roads)
- Increasing quality of public servants on local level, minimizing contracting/consulting fees

**Are there any other important issues that we have not discussed yet?**

- The meeting was totally different than expected; it is not what the flyer said (3 tables)
- Make-up of the commission is somewhat suspect
- Everyone thought the members of the Commission would be here
- Wish they had handed out the questions ahead of time



- The questions are very leading and unfair
- Offer more forums to community
- Start in the community for affordable housing
- Taxes! Property assessment. Tax abatement because of building a home in a distressed area. Lots of homes are for sale due to astronomic taxes.
- Taxpayer is concerned because the tax bill will be late, and uncertainty is increasing
- We need to do our homework before we decide to have people build in Gary. Our politicians don't think things through well.
- Are we at the crossroads?
- Library Central Information Center
- State Agency Division of Family Services and social work agencies needs more funding
- The economy
- Lack of job opportunities in Indiana
- Federal Housing residents can't put up election signs without permission.
- Visclosky and Purdue do not need \$7 million for business