

# CONSENSUS QUESTIONS WITH PROS, CONS AND CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

## Consensus Questions on Counties

### 1. Should the state constitution be changed to require:

**A. Counties to transfer the functions of the following elected officials to either appointive position or to departments established by the county?**

- a. **County Clerk**
- b. **Register of Deeds**
- c. **Drain Commissioner**
- d. **Treasurer**
- e. **Sheriff**
- f. **Prosecuting Attorney**
- g. **Board of Road Commissioners**

**B. And, if so, should a County be required to empower its manager or executive officer to supervise and coordinate administrative departments, boards and commissions?**

### **Pro:**

1. There would be better accountability and clearer lines of authority, because personnel would serve at the pleasure of the commission instead of the voters.
2. There would be increased transparency to the public.
3. People would have to be qualified to be chosen and professionalism would increase.
4. Job duties could be combined or rearranged leading to increased efficiency and effectiveness.
5. Cooperation would be increased.

6. Yes, the constitution would have to be changed (except in the case of the drain commissioner and the road commissioner which would require a change in the state law but not the constitution), but League positions should state what we think would be best, not what is feasible in today's political climate.

**Con:**

1. There would be too much concentration of power in the chief executive.
2. It would require a constitutional amendment and may not be possible politically.
3. It would be expensive to implement.

**2. Should the State Constitution be changed to require county elections to be nonpartisan?**

**Pro:**

1. Since the electorate in Michigan is divided about evenly among Democrats, Republicans and people unaffiliated with either party, it would make sense to give everyone a chance to run for these offices. There are well-qualified people who are unaffiliated and who do not want to go through the charade of pretending to be a member of one party.
2. Nonpartisan elections would help to dampen down partisan wrangling if a mix of Democrats and Republicans were elected. For example, the Oakland County Commission is split 13 Republicans and 12 Democrats. The majority has not assigned Democrats to committees in that same ratio. Also, some townships in southeast Michigan have mixed party boards and it has led to an extreme partisan atmosphere, with the minority having no say whatsoever in most decisions.
3. Finally, almost all cities and villages call for nonpartisan elections of their councils/commissions, as do local school boards.

4. Most issues are or should be nonpartisan.
5. Better decisions would be made because they would not be based on party ideology.

**Con:**

1. It would deal a blow to the party system. Local offices have often provided a party “farm team” from which a party may recruit experienced people to serve in higher partisan office, like the State House and Senate.
2. Even though the state overall is a mix of party affiliation or no party affiliation, most local units of government such as counties and townships are relatively homogenous so partisan elections are not a problem.

## **Consensus Questions on Townships**

### **3. Should the state constitution be changed:**

**To require townships to transfer the functions traditionally**

**performed by the clerk and treasurer to appointive positions and departments established by the township; and empower its manager or supervisor to supervise and coordinate administrative departments, boards and commissions?**

### **Background Information**

The offices of the clerk and treasurer share responsibility for making and keeping financial records. The clerk maintains the general ledger, which constitutes the official record of revenues and expenditures. Treasurers record and account for the revenues that accrue to the township and report that data to the clerk to be included in the general ledger. These rules require the clerk and the treasurer to work together and share financial information

periodically. The clerk and treasurer act as a check and balance on each other. This is envisioned as a way to keep everyone honest.

There are no stated qualifications for either of these positions. Training is recommended by the Michigan Townships Association, but there is no requirement that township officers attend.

**Pro:**

1. Problems may arise if the treasurer and the clerk do not get along. If the treasurer does not allow the clerk to see the bank statements, the clerk cannot perform his/her job.
2. There would be more accountability since appointive personnel serve at the pleasure of the township board or supervisor.
3. There would be increased transparency to the public.
4. People would have to be qualified to be chosen and professionalism would increase.
5. Job duties could be combined or rearranged leading to increased efficiency and effectiveness.
6. Cooperation would be increased.
7. Yes, the constitution would have to be changed, but League positions should reflect what League members would like to have happen, not what is politically feasible at the moment.

**Con:**

1. There would be too much concentration of power in the supervisor or manager.
2. It would require a constitutional amendment and may not be possible politically.
3. It would be expensive to implement.

**4. If townships meet the following standards:**

- \*a minimum required SEV as stated by law or regulation, and**
- \*a minimum density of population as stated by law or regulation, and**
- \*a stipulated range of services and,**
- \*the levy of a tax large enough to support those stipulated services,**

**should townships be required to:**

- a. employ professional managers, or**
- b. adopt a city form of government?**

**Background Information**

When LWVMI studied townships in the early 1980s, they asked pretty much the same question, “Should urban townships be required to change to a city charter form of government if they meet the following standards for a municipality?” For this study, we have incorporated the same standards as they used (see #4 above). Back then, the reports they received about townships were from League members living in rural areas of Gratiot and Midland counties. In those sparsely populated townships, the current system worked well. Township officers held full-time jobs elsewhere or were stay-at-home wives and were quite able to perform their township duties in their free time. There were only certain times of the year that work needed to be done. The LWVMI came to no consensus on this question back in 1981.

Today, 26 years later, we have many more members living in urban townships and they have seen how dysfunctional this form of government can be. In the accompanying table following this page, one can see how little difference there is between urban townships and nearby cities in population, area, SEV, density, and services provided. Several townships in Oakland County chose to

become cities as recently as the 1970s: Farmington Hills (Farmington Township), Rochester Hills (Avon Township) and Auburn Hills (the portion of Pontiac Township that lay outside the city of Pontiac). Ironically, the first two surround the much older and smaller cities of Farmington and Rochester, respectively. Now the two Farmingtons are in very early discussions about merging.

Like the vast majority of cities, many townships have managers, but many of the largest do not. Thus, it becomes a question of who is in charge. The supervisor, clerk and treasurer each have statutory duties, but the law does not cover many other functions such as personnel or human resources, public works, planning, recreation, etc. Each township without a manager divides up the work by mutual agreement and in many cases the supervisor becomes the de facto CEO. This is not the most efficient way to run a complex municipality. There is often no incentive for change either, unless the citizens demand it. For example, Bloomfield Township recently conducted an “internal” study on city-hood and came to the conclusion that it did not make sense to change. Few, if any citizens were aware of this study or involved in the process.

### **Pro**

The main advantage to becoming a city or remaining a township and hiring a manager/CEO is more efficient and professional operation of the unit of government. Currently township officers (supervisor, clerk and treasurer) are not required to meet any job qualifications, nor are they required to participate in training.

A city form of government also allows the citizens to make decisions about the length of term for council persons / commissioners, when to have elections, whether to stagger their terms and whether to have nonpartisan elections.

## **Con**

On the other hand, should the state be the one to force this issue? Is it not up to the citizens in a given community to make this decision as has been done so many times since the Home Rule City Act of 1909 went into effect?

## **5. Should the state constitution be changed to require township elections to be nonpartisan?**

### **Pro:**

1. Since the electorate in Michigan is divided about evenly among Democrats, Republicans and people unaffiliated with either party, it would make sense to give everyone a chance to run for these offices. There are well-qualified people who are unaffiliated and who do not want to go through the charade of pretending to be a member of one party.
2. Nonpartisan elections would help to dampen down partisan wrangling if a mix of Democrats and Republicans were elected. For example, the Oakland county Commission is split 13 Republicans and 12 Democrats. The majority has not assigned Democrats to committees in that same ratio. Also, some townships in southeast Michigan have mixed party boards and it has led to an extreme partisan atmosphere, with the minority having no say whatsoever in most decisions.
3. Finally, almost all cities and villages call for nonpartisan elections of their councils/commissions, as do local school boards.
4. Most issues are or should be nonpartisan.
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### **Con**

1. It would deal a blow to the party system. Local offices have

often provided a party “farm team” from which a party may recruit experienced people to serve in higher partisan office, like the state House and Senate.

2. Even though the state overall is a mix of party affiliation or no party affiliation, most local units of government such as counties and townships, are relatively homogeneous so partisan elections are not a problem.

## **6. Should state laws require the terms of township board members to be staggered?**

### **Background Information**

The 1963 Constitution allowed for the legislature to designate whether township terms should be for two or four years. It was silent on when the elections should be held. The legislature initially continued the two-year terms, but changed to four-year terms beginning with the 1980 election. All officers were to be elected at the same time.

### **Pro**

The main advantage of staggering terms is the avoidance of the complete turnover of a township board at one time. Many cities and villages call for staggered terms of their councils/commissions in their charters. Also, almost all school boards also have adopted staggered terms of their trustees. Staggering has worked well for these government bodies.

### **Con**

The terms have never been staggered in the past, and without time-consuming research, it is not known if the current system has actually caused any problems.

## **Consensus Questions Relating to Both Counties and Townships**

### **Background Information for Questions 7 and 8**

The state is facing a budget crisis. State revenues have dropped 29% since 1999 as a result of high unemployment and reductions in the state income tax. (Office of State Treasurer, February 8, 2007)

Since Fiscal Year 2001, local government funding has been cut by 62%, reflecting reduced revenues at the state level. In response to reduced revenues, local governments have cut local services, including the layoff of more than 1,600 police officers since 2001. (Michigan League for Human Services, February 2007)

Another response has been to consider sharing services. A report by MSU professor Eric Scorsone, based on the work of a task force on combining local government services, showed that local governments can in many cases save money by combining services such as fire, road maintenance, water and sewer administration, and emergency services dispatch. (Gongwer, February 14, 2007)

Consolidation of local units is also being considered, although Lynn Harvey from the MSU extension Service has pointed out that consolidation of local government units does not always mean reduced costs, especially in the short term. (Gongwer, February 14, 2007)

Harvey did support linking revenue sharing increases to demonstrations that communities were working together to provide services. (Gongwer, February 14, 2007)

**7. A. Should the League support sharing of governmental services, such as fire, police, parks and recreation, water, and sewage treatment, among local units of government?**

**Pro**

Sharing of public services usually results in cost savings because of decreased costs of administration, personnel, purchasing, and information technology. Sharing prevents overlapping of services, and thus increases efficiency in the delivery of those services, as well as providing equity in services for the whole region.

Efficiency is increased because services can be delivered on functional rather than political lines.

**Con**

Local officials may worry about losing autonomy. Various funding sources----federal, state, local, grants, etc. may complicate agreements for sharing, and costs may actually rise in the short run. Union contracts may lock in positions that cannot be eliminated and the possible layoff of public employees may make the idea of sharing untenable in some areas.

**7. B. Should the State provide incentives to encourage sharing of services such as fire, police, parks and recreation, water and sewage treatment among local units of government?**

**Pro**

Incentives may help local units of government overcome resistance to sharing services.

While the state may not be able to afford financial incentives during the current budget crisis, League positions are for the long term, not the short term.

## **Con**

The state may not be in a financial position that would allow it to provide enough financial incentives to local units of government to overcome their resistance to change.

### **8. A. Should the League support reducing the number of local units of government through consolidation?**

## **Pro**

There are 1,858 general units of local government plus 556 school districts in the state of Michigan. Economic development, provision of services, school districts and community identification often overlap. The taxpayer would be better served if some townships and their adjoining cities would combine. Costs would be lower and regional planning would be enhanced.

## **Con**

Studies have shown that consolidation of governmental units does not necessarily mean reduced costs. Many people identify with their community and do not want to combine with another community. Politically, it would be impossible to pass legislation that would impose consolidation on people who did not want it. In rural parts of the state, it would not make sense to combine townships with cities that are miles away.

### **8. B. Should the state provide incentives to encourage consolidation of local units of government?**

## **Pro**

In addition to the arguments listed in favor of consolidation (see 8a), there would be the further advantage that communities would be given a choice. The state would offer incentives (financial or

otherwise) that would encourage governmental units to combine if it made sense economically and politically.

**Con**

Since so few communities would find this advantageous, it does not make sense to address this with new legislation. Communities can combine now if they choose to do so.

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