

A MESSAGE FROM THE KING COUNTY ASSESSOR – SCOTT NOBLE

2000 has been a year of steady progress with many improvements to assessment administration. Most commendable is the continuation of technology achievements in the mass appraisal field recognized last year with our Distinguished Assessment Jurisdiction Award for North America.

In past years I have remarked on governance fragmentation and property tax relief attempts in that environment. Here, I will reexamine local governance structure and tax systems, especially given recent events.

A proliferation of ballot initiatives and numerous calls for property tax relief have sent a very clear message – voters want property tax increases to slow down. But, Washington State initiatives as a whole told the Legislature this year to tax less and spend more. These contradictory messages come into a 19th Century local tax system and governance structure ill-suited to meet the demands of a 21st Century economy and community. A much learned historian, J. M. Roberts in his *Twentieth Century*, says “we lack perspective; we are not far enough away from the things we are looking at to see them in proportion to one another”. Unfortunately, our fragmented governance structure and public initiative quick-fix remedies mimic this statement.

Boundaries are increasingly invisible, yet we tend to think vertically – states, counties, cities, school districts – when more and more of our problems are horizontal – urban sprawl, traffic, economic growth. University of Washington Economics Professor Neil Bruce thinks we need to establish a *Center for Studies in State and Local Government Finance* because “the decentralized nature of government has hampered efforts to even assess the magnitude and nature of the problems, much less devise effective solutions”. We have recently seen a vivid example of the drawbacks of fragmentation in our national electoral process.

‘So what else is new’ some say. This issue has been around a long time, and such local variation lies at the heart of a federal system. New are the increasing costs, both fiscal and social. The visible voter frustration through the initiative system definitely suggests the system we have now does not work well.

What might work better? I suggest we look at other areas for some ideas on our reform efforts:

- On January 1, 2001, a San Diego regional commission will be formed to propose a plan for consolidating regional agencies. The Los Angeles Times thinks it could be a pathfinder, and present dramatic new concepts of governance to the Legislature and voters.
- In the Greater Toronto Area, 6 municipalities amalgamated with Toronto into a megacity. Despite it being very controversial three years ago, a recent poll found 60% of those asked thought it was the right decision and 37% said it provides better government.
- In North Texas, the Tarrant County Cooperative Purchasing Program was established four years ago, and now 67 different agencies across the region save citizens money with economies of scale buying and processes.
- Illinois municipalities are mulling over new 1999 amendments to the state’s 1973 Intergovernmental Cooperation Act, the new law giving communities an extra nudge to cooperate.
- Grant County, Washington and the City of Moses Lake reached an agreement in late 1999 to share tax revenues from property once in the county, but annexed by the city, ending a fight thought to have delayed a major business move to the region by a decade.

Here, we have made some progress, but maybe it’s time to revisit our mid-nineties efforts to address similar issues and problems. All reform efforts share many characteristics; they are an incremental process, seek a subtle balance between centralizing power and devolving it, and try to create strong, united partnerships to compete well in today’s global economy. Consistency and uniformity are not unreasonable amongst necessary partners. Perhaps it is time for leaders to be resolute on the need to create partnerships and structures better able to meet the needs of our future and preserve our quality of life.

Unless we gain the courage to lead on tough issues and demonstrate we can work together, we will continue to be bombarded by interest group initiatives full of unintended consequences. And, unfortunately, these consequences will not work to the benefit of us all.

