



Somerset County administrator: Counties deliver services efficiently and effectively

A column by George Smith got a lot wrong about county government.

My colleagues and I have read George Smith's column about county government ("[Good riddance to counties.](#)" Nov. 23). His statement that we don't need county government is blatantly false. Let's take a good look at what the county actually does to serve its residents.

Somerset County, like most other Maine counties, has the county jail, the sheriff's department, the probate court, the registry of deeds, the IT department, a regional communications center, the emergency management office and the district attorney's office.

Smith says that nobody ever cuts a county budget, but that is untrue; we cut each department to the bone. Then it goes to the county commissioners, who cut it again, and then, if necessary, the Budget Committee cuts it. Remember, the Budget Committee is made up of municipal officials, so Smith's statement that there is no way to lower the county's budget or spending is simply false.

Statistics show that county government is between 8 and 10 percent of municipal budgets. With this, we provide services to 52,000 people for just over \$11 million while just one of our municipalities has a \$4 million-to-\$5 million budget for approximately 4,500 people. Somerset has 33 municipalities.

The only statement in the column that has any semblance of truth is that people are not aware of what the county actually provides for services. It's a regionalized form of government that is cost-effective and efficient. Smith's statement that the duties

performed by the county can be easily transferred to the state is false. If that were true, we would be gone by now.

More importantly, what studies back up that claim? Research indicates that the state cannot do it more cheaply.

Smith's information regarding probate and deeds is simply incorrect, as everything is not online. To date, we have recorded 15,204 documents countywide in the registry of deeds and probate continues to serve those who need wills probated and guardianships.

Smith says it makes no sense to have local, state and county policing, but Somerset has 10 deputies who cover 4,000 square miles. In fact, we partnered with Madison to provide police services and the county saved the town roughly \$90,000 the first year and approximately \$50,000 the second year. That is real money saved for the taxpayers.

Before the state became involved in our county jails, they were operating adequately; but when the state took control, they fell apart. After an eight-year experiment, the state admitted it couldn't do it better or more cheaply and returned control to the counties. That wasn't done in a vacuum but after many studies, and plenty of facts and figures before our delegates.

Does anyone have any idea how much good the county jail does in the community? For example, we recently graduated 13 inmates with GEDs with plenty of programs to prevent recidivism. We don't release inmates into the community to re-offend; instead we give them a chance to become contributing members of society.

The problem with the county jails isn't mismanagement; it is lack of funding promised to us by the state. I agree that the local taxpayers should not have to pay for costs associated with housing state prisoners, as this should be the state's responsibility; and had the state kept its promises, we wouldn't be talking about this today.

I agree we could all use some property tax relief, but wouldn't it make sense to have us collaborate and consolidate to save money? For example, our regional communications center has already begun servicing some municipalities in Kennebec County. Each of the municipalities we service recognized significant savings. The county dispatches for 25 fire departments, three municipal police departments, and the sheriff's department, as well as eight ambulance services.

Blaming county government for lack of funding coming out of Augusta is absurd. On May 5, 2016, Smith wrote a column with the headline, "Augusta is divided and dysfunctional." Has that changed since May?

In 2012, Smith wrote, "County Government has outlived its usefulness, why expand it?" The answer is, to save the taxpayers' money.

Finally let's talk about the advance of local government by local people. We take pride in being fiscally conservative. County employees live in the county, so they take taxes to heart since it affects us personally as well as professionally.

It just amazes me that Smith suggests we remove one of the most efficient forms of government and replace it with a less effective, more expensive system.

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