

Too Many Governments

If Local Government Is To Receive More State Aid, Its Efficiency Is a Matter of Statewide Concern

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is another article in a series discussing trends in Oklahoma's governmental financing, particularly as the trends affect the state's educational institutions.

IN studying the state's difficulties over the financing of the normal and customary functions of government, it becomes apparent that one of the reasons for the growing weakness of the general fund is the practice of diverting increasing proportions of state-collected revenues to the use of local government.

This practice is not necessarily wrong in principle, but if it is to continue, certain steps should be taken to prevent disruption of the state budget.

First—if this practice is to continue, it is necessary to find additional sources of state revenue to take care of the shift of much of the tax burden from local government to the state, or else the normal functions of state government will break down.

Second—if the state continues to supply a large share of the cost of local government, it is of state-wide interest that local governments be reorganized to eliminate unnecessary duplication of services and costs. If local governments are to continue as beneficiaries of the state treasury, then it is urgent that the administrative methods and the costs of these local units be re-examined in the interests of economy and efficiency.

It has been popular, in recent years, to complain that we have "too much government." The complaint would be easier to substantiate if it were changed to "too many governments."

In this suggestion may lie a partial explanation of stupendous public debts and excessive tax bills. We have in the United States about 175,000 units of local government, ranging from counties and great cities to mosquito abatement districts, all of which are empowered to collect and spend the taxpayers' money.

In New York state there are approximately 13,000 local tax-spending units; Illinois has 17,000. Oklahoma is well supplied with about 5,500, which on the basis of population gives us parity with Illinois. New York has some sort of local government for each 1,000 inhabitants; Oklahoma has one for each 500. New York elects some county officer for each 13,000 inhabitants; Oklahoma elects one for each 2,600.

Our state elects a local government official for each 120 residents—from constable to mayor or county commissioner. Oklahoma alone supports more than twice as many governments as exist in both England and Wales.

In 1938, all governments, federal, state and local, collected 14,811 millions of tax dollars. For a variety of reasons, the popular notion prevails that the federal government consumed most of these revenues. As a matter of fact, it received little more than six of the approximately fifteen billions. The balance was divided between the state and the local governments—counties, towns, cities, and school districts. These local governments collected \$4,920,000,000.

In 1938, local governments in Oklahoma cost taxpayers \$80,197,755.89. County governments cost almost 19 millions, towns and cities slightly more than 22 millions, while public schools cost about 39.5 millions. When this respectable total is broken down to discover the costs of particular county offices, we find some occasion for concern. We spent \$358,000 for seventy-seven offices of the county attorney; almost \$1,153,000 for seventy-seven offices of the county sheriff; approximately \$325,000 for seventy-seven offices of the superintendent of education, and so on.

NATURALLY, the question is raised: "Are so many offices, performing the same functions, necessary to good government of Oklahoma?" Sound principles of administration, private or public, do not condone unnecessary duplication of service agencies.

A factual study of local government administration in Oklahoma confronts numerous difficulties. Government reporting in this state is inadequate, and in some instances, is entirely lacking. One generalization, however, finds increasing factual support. *The more populous counties receive more services per tax dollar spent than do counties of small populations.*

Some indication of the wide difference in the costs of services, from county to county, is found in the expenditures per enumerated child by the various offices of the county superintendent of education. In Oklahoma county (1938), with almost 250,000 inhabitants, this cost was 27 cents per child; in Cimarron county, with a pop-

ulation of less than 6,000, it was \$1.61. Tulsa county spent 31 cents for this service, while Harper spent \$1.10.

This variation reaches into other county services. Tulsa, with its great wealth and large population to protect, spent 49 cents per capita on the sheriff's office; Cimarron spent 62 cents. However, low costs are not always with the populous county. Harper with less than 8,000 inhabitants, spent almost identically the same amount per capita on the sheriff's office as did Tulsa.

The fact remains that there is no satisfactory accounting for the variation of the costs of services from county to county.

Comparable conditions are found in school districts. High school costs, the Brookings Institute revealed, decline in this state per enumerated pupil as enrollment increases.

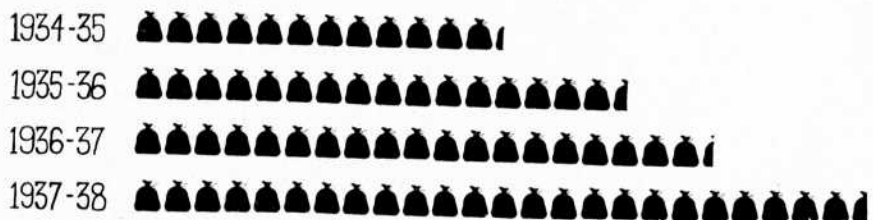
Cleveland county rural schools disclose the same trend. Sixty-eight rural schools operate in this county, none of which has an enrollment in excess of 100. Investigation (1938) reveals that schools of this type having an enrollment of less than 21 cost \$75.66 per enumerated child, while schools having an enrollment of less than 101 cost \$34.70 per enumerated child.

Unjustified conclusions can be drawn from limited facts. Arithmetic is not the sole standard by which good government is to be judged. Road building in mountainous McCurtain county confronts problems not found in the prairie counties of the west. The costs of administration are likely to be greater in sparsely settled areas, even in these days of the automobile and the telephone.

But allowances for such factors do not explain all differences. It remains doubtful whether Oklahoma needs seventy-seven county jails, and whether we are best served by seventy-seven different county road building authorities, (often split still further among individual County Commissioners) or by seventy-seven county sheriffs. It is inconceivable that this state can long afford the questionable luxury of some 4,700 school districts, fifty-four per-

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CHART I



This chart shows the steady increase in the amount of state-collected tax revenue returned to local governments in Oklahoma during recent years. Each money-bag symbol represents one million dollars.

Jimmy McNatt, Oklahoma forward, scoring a long goal against Southern Methodist University. The camera caught most of the ball, high in the air. The Sooners won, 57 to 32.



in this game when Oklahoma suddenly hit a scoring streak that saw them thread the hoop for 25 points in ten minutes, a furious pace that if continued the full 40 minutes of a game, would have netted 100 points. A few days later Kansas State went to Lawrence and nearly upset the Jayhawkers, Kansas barely winning on her own court, 34 to 33, on a free shot in the last four seconds of the game.

Oklahoma's fourth defeat of the year followed on January 10 at Stillwater when Hank Iba's smooth-passing Oklahoma Aggies, winners of 10 straight games this season and undefeated on their home floor in five years, won an exciting contest before 7,200 fans in the new Aggie Fieldhouse.

With only two minutes of playing time left, Drake's cagers, who shelved their speed for the same cautious passing and guarding the Aggies use so well, were tied with the Aggies 19 to 19 and themselves had possession of the ball. However, at this critical point a questionable double dribble violation was called on a Sooner player and the Aggies given the ball out of bounds.

This incident was the battle's turning point. Harvey Slade of the Farmers then hit a long goal and with the Aggies leading 21 to 19 and the final seconds fleeting, the Sooners had to go out after the ball, thereby spreading and weakening their own tight defense. The Aggies drove in for two more field goals before the bell.

However, better days are ahead for the Sooner basketekers with six of the nine remaining games scheduled for their own floor.

Jan. 20 Iowa State at Norman.
Jan. 27 Nebraska at Lincoln.
Jan. 29 Missouri at Columbia.
Feb. 2 Kansas State at Norman.
Feb. 9 Nebraska at Norman.
Feb. 12 Missouri at Norman.
Feb. 20 Oklahoma Aggies at Norman.
March 2 Iowa State at Ames.
March 8 Kansas at Norman.

Tribute to Jack Davis

Cocky Jack Davis, greatest swimmer in the University's history, is still a winner although he got his B.A. degree here three years ago.

The slender youth who won five Big Six championships during his spectacular career and still holds three-fourths the University aquatic records, is now a prominent Hutchinson, Kansas, lumberman and president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce there and recently was named Hutchinson's No. 1 citizen for 1939 over twenty-seven other outstanding civic leaders of that western Kansas metropolis.

Davis was married January 6 in Harlowton, Montana, to Louise Peterson and they will be at home in Hutchinson after February 1.

Wrestling schedule

The Oklahoma wrestling schedule for 1940, arranged by Coach Tom Stidham, is as follows:

Feb. 3 Edmond Teachers at Edmond.
Feb. 9 Weatherford Teachers at Weatherford.
Feb. 16 Kansas State at Norman.
Feb. 28 Oklahoma Aggies at Stillwater.
March 4 Oklahoma Aggies at Norman.
March 8 and 9 Big Six meet at Ames, Iowa.

Big Six Basketball Champions

	W	L	Pct.	Pts.	Opp. Av.	Margin	Coach
1929 Oklahoma	10	0	1.000	38.0	28.0	10.0	McDermott
1930 Missouri	8	2	.800	32.6	24.7	7.9	Edwards
1931 Kansas	7	3	.700	32.6	25.2	7.4	Allen
1932 Kansas	7	3	.700	31.6	26.4	5.2	Allen
1933 Kansas	8	2	.800	31.3	23.6	7.7	Allen
1934 Kansas	9	1	.900	29.1	23.5	5.6	Allen
1935 Iowa State	8	2	.800	32.2	27.4	4.8	Menze
1936 Kansas	10	0	1.000	42.2	26.8	15.4	Allen
1937 Kansas (tie)	8	2	.800	35.2	27.0	8.2	Allen
Nebraska (tie)	8	2	.800	37.7	30.4	7.3	Browne
1938 Kansas	9	1	.900	40.8	32.9	7.9	Allen
1939 Missouri (tie)	7	3	.700	45.0	37.2	7.8	Edwards
Oklahoma (tie)	7	3	.700	46.2	41.6	4.6	Drake

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cent of which are one teacher affairs. Probably no plan is better designed to guarantee the least return from the tax dollar.

It is a bit trite, of course, to describe the organization of local government in Oklahoma as a "horse and buggy" affair. But this is an accurate way to describe it. The pattern of county government, still persistently followed in the United States was well established before the adoption of the Constitution. The geographical dimensions of this political subdivision measure to suit the convenience of travel. It was understood that the county seat should be so located that a resident could drive to the county seat and return in a day. Roughly this was the measurement. It was necessary in our early history for a man to carry his tax monies to a government treasury, for there was no banking system such as today enables the tax payer to remain a complete stranger to the interior of a tax-gathering office.

Because travel was inconvenient and communication inadequate there was need for numerous local governments with comprehensive authority. But if we were to apply these standards today, we would eliminate more than half of the three thousand counties in the United States.

There are few county seats in Oklahoma which cannot be reached by the average resident within ninety minutes. From the standpoint of accessibility the modern state capitol is more local in character than most early county seats.

"When the present boundaries of county subdivisions were established" Governor Leon C. Phillips recently observed, "thirty miles was about as far as any county resident could be asked to go to attend to his business at the county seat. Since then the automobile has changed the whole picture and the geographical factor no longer is valid."

There is, of course, a danger in too much government at the top and too little government at the bottom. But local government is, to some extent, a relative matter, relative to means of travel and communication; and in our efforts to preserve it, we need attribute no particular sanctity to a plan of organization evolved more than two hundred years ago. Between the extremes of present decentralization and possible excessive centralization, there is a sensible mean which challenges the thoughtful citizen. The best assurance that local government shall be preserved lies in its constant adjustment to the needs of a dynamic society.

CORRECTION: In last month's article in this series, the caption under Chart I erroneously stated that the figures represented per capita debt in Oklahoma, including both state and local debt. Actually, the figures given represented only net local per capita debt and did not include state debt.