



The Civic Federation

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WHY YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT REFORMING COOK COUNTY

County government touches each and every one of its 5.3 million residents, either through its collection of tax and fee revenue or in providing judicial, public health, public safety, and other services.

People who care about the following issues should care about making Cook County a more efficient, modern, and transparent unit of government:

TAXES:

Whether you and your family or friends require its services on a daily basis or not, the County's inefficient operations and outmoded governance structure will continue to hit you in the wallet if major changes to County operations are not made.

The Cook County Board's vote in 2008 to raise the County's portion of the sales tax by one percentage point gave Chicago the largest sales tax of any major metropolitan area in the country. While a 2009 repeal of half of that tax hike has reduced City of Chicago sales taxes to a tie for highest in the nation at 9.75%, a high tax environment has potentially hurt businesses and disproportionately affected low-income County residents. That is why the Civic Federation calls on the next County Board President to repeal the rest of the sales tax increase to provide relief to overburdened taxpayers.

The County has not raised its property tax levy in the last decade, but if expenditures are not cut to balance a large budget deficit for 2011, the County could decide to raise other taxes or maintain the current sales tax rate.

Cook County's inefficiency costs taxpayers money. That's why the Civic Federation's Cook County Modernization Project provides recommendations to reduce the cost of County government and make it more sustainable over the long-term.

PUBLIC SAFETY:

Cook County operates the Circuit Court of Cook County, which prosecutes persons charged with criminal offenses, the County Jail, which detains persons during the period between arrest and sentencing, and the Sheriff's Police Department, whose primary responsibility is to provide police services to the 109,300 residents of unincorporated Cook County.

Public Safety operations take up over half of the County's \$3 billion budget. Of the \$1.2 billion in public safety expenditures, over \$1.0 billion was appropriated for personnel services. Addressing Cook County's financial challenges will require a close examination of public safety expenditures to find opportunities to address waste and inefficiency in the criminal justice system. Some of the greatest areas for cost savings involve larger public policy questions such as how to address non-violent and mentally ill offenders, the proper adjudication process including the possible role for recognizance bonds and electronic monitoring, diversion programs, and juvenile detention alternatives.

If the County does not modernize, the cost of providing public safety will continue to grow faster than available revenues, leading to possible tax increases. That's why the Cook County Modernization Project includes recommendations to create a Public Safety Task Force to start the process of reforming public safety at the County.

PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE HEALTHCARE SAFETY NET:

The Cook County Health and Hospitals System is by far the largest provider of healthcare to the uninsured in the State of Illinois. The County also provides regulatory, preventative and protective health services to County residents, including clinical public health visits through the Cook County Department of Public Health.

Since 2008 the Health System has been governed by an independent Board of Directors. On June 1, 2010, County Commissioners voted to make the Health System Board permanent. However, Health System budgets are still subject to approval by the Board of Commissioners. The Health System is in the midst of implementing a strategic plan that will shift resources away from inpatient care toward outpatient care in order to serve more patients and increase System efficiency.

The Health System accounted for 41.6% of the County's General Funds operating budget, or \$973.9 million, in FY2010. Patient fees and fee-related revenues were budgeted to cover 59.5% of Health System expenses, or \$579 million, meaning a subsidy from the County was required to cover most of the rest.

In order for the Cook County Health System to continue to carry out its strategic plan, the Civic Federation recommends that it be given more control over its budget.

CONSERVATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT:

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County is a unit of government legally separate from Cook County that has for nearly 100 years had a mission to protect and conserve natural lands in the County for the recreation and enjoyment of residents.

However, the Forest Preserve District is governed by the same Commissioners who govern the County. The Federation believes this dual-board structure has created an unavoidable conflict of interest that has contributed to neglect of the preserves.

The Civic Federation's Cook County Modernization Project reinforces the Federation's commitment to working with environmental groups, public officials, and the people of Cook County to establish a separate governing board for the Forest Preserve District.

People who care about the Forest Preserves or about protecting and expanding green space in Cook County should support the Modernization Project's recommendations to reform County government.