

# Arlington Heights officials: township consolidation would cost more

[Karen Ann Cullotta](#) [Contact Reporter](#) Chicago Tribune

Lambasting a state task force's recommendation to consolidate local townships, officials in [Arlington Heights](#) said the proposal would prove more costly to residents and hurt the most vulnerable members of the community.

The Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandates Task Force's final report, which was released this week by Illinois Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti, includes 27 recommendations, one of which would allow towns to dissolve or consolidate townships via referendum.

"This report shows the efficiencies and inefficiencies within local governments and provides concepts on how to give the people of Illinois more control over their future and their tax dollars," Illinois Gov. [Bruce Rauner](#) said in a Monday statement.

Arlington Heights Mayor Thomas Hayes said he supported Rauner's efforts to pursue more efficient government structures, especially in the area of unfunded mandates.

But Hayes said that consolidating [Wheeling](#) Township's many social service programs into the village would likely end up costing local taxpayers more money in the long-run.

"The village relies very heavily on Wheeling Township, especially for social services for our residents that the village can't afford to provide," Hayes said. "We would obviously have to increase our staffing, and there certainly would be a lot of costs that would end up being passed on to the taxpayers and residents."

Hayes said, if the township consolidation recommendation were to move forward, local residents would still be given the chance via a voter referendum to decide whether or not they approve of the idea.

"There is some comfort in the fact that we would have the opportunity to educate and advise our residents on the issue before a referendum," Hayes said.

Wheeling Township serves about 156,000 people, including Arlington Heights residents living north of Central Road, as well as those who live in portions of Buffalo Grove, Mount Prospect, Prospect Heights, Des Plaines, Rolling Meadows, Northbrook and Wheeling, said Jo Stellato, the township's director of finance and administration.

Last year, a Wheeling Township resident with a home valued at \$320,000 paid about \$60 in property taxes to the township, Stellato said.

The township's budget of roughly \$4 million in 2015 included a General Assistance Fund, which helps residents experiencing a financial crisis by providing funding for emergency shelter, food, utility fees and medications, Stellato said.

"We help all those people who fall between the cracks," Stellato said. "These are families and individuals where people have jobs, but they're underemployed, and not making as much as they used to, so they're just not making ends meet."

Other township programs include an assessor's office tasked with assisting residents with property tax issues, providing transportation for senior citizens and residents with disabilities, a food pantry and a mobile dental clinic.

In 2015, the township also provided \$850,000 in grants to local social service agencies that provide child care, substance abuse and mental health programs, and youth services, Stellato said.

Wheeling Township Supervisor Michael Schroeder said, if the township's services were to be consolidated, "the people who would be most affected are those who are at risk financially and can least afford to lose the services."

Schroeder, 61, a dentist and Arlington Heights native, said he is paid \$38,000 a year to be township supervisor – a fee which he said has not increased since 2001.

The state task force report cites Evanston Township's 2014 consolidation into the city of Evanston as an example of efficient local government, but Schroeder says, because Wheeling Township provides services for several towns, the comparison is not valid.

"This proposal to consolidate townships is just kind of bizarre to me," said Schroeder, a former Wheeling Township Republican Committeeman. "They are talking about streamlining government in Illinois to save the taxpayer money. But if you talk about consolidating a township into Cook County, our county already has a budget shortfall, so that's just not an option."

Schroeder said that, in 2015, the township had 5,000 visits to its food pantry, served more than 20,000 meals in the Meals on Wheels program, and its buses provided seniors and disabled residents with 25,000 rides.

"If you want to deliver government efficiently and effectively, I don't think you'll find anyone who does it better than the township," Schroeder said.

Still, the recent task force report suggests that, according to the Census of Government report by the U.S. Census Bureau, Illinois has more local units of government than any other state in the nation, at 6,963, as well as the second-highest effective property tax rate.

"This report is the culmination of an 11-month effort of the Task Force joining together in support of proposals to structurally reform state and local government, and get Illinois back on

track," Sanguinetti said in a statement this week. "As a mother of three, I want my kids to live in a better Illinois. I want them to live in a state that tackles its fiscal and structural issues head-on, with real reform.

"I hope our leadership in the [General Assembly](#) puts politics aside and considers the needed reforms in this report."

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