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IMPROVING COUNTY GOVERNMENT

WHAT WILL CAROLINA DO?

Last week's issue of the University News Letter carried a syllabus of county government studies in the Rural Social Science Department of the University in 1920-21. In this issue we present a cursory account of county government in the state and the country-at-large, by E. C. Branson in the September number of the Municipal Quarterly Review; and also the notes on county government legislation prepared by Dr. H. W. Dodds for the legislature of Louisiana at the approaching session this fall.

Louisiana, be it remembered, has a new constitution which commands the legislature to provide optional forms of local government to be adopted in each parish or county by a majority vote of the citizens thereof.

Dr. Dodds is chairman of the committee of county government of the National Municipal League, and these notes were prepared by him at the request of Mr. Hardtner, the convention member who secured the constitutional provision on revised county government in Louisiana.

It seems to us that the time is at hand when North Carolina must also move to secure more efficient county government. There is hardly any more important concern of the state at present.

LOUISIANA MOVES FORWARD

County government is in the same deplorable condition today that city government was in a generation ago, and as indicated in the report of this committee in 1917, its reorganization will doubtless proceed along the same general lines that municipal government has followed. This means particularly the introduction of the short ballot and the reorganization of county administration in the direction of simplification and consolidation of power and responsibility. The reorganization movement now so active in state administration seems to point the way for the reorganization of county administration.

Two-Fold Relationship

The problem is complicated by the dual position of the county. The county is both a unit of state administration and of local self-government. This is not always obvious because the local administration of state affairs is often in the hands of men elected locally and not in the hands of men appointed and removed by the central power as in France. It seems important, in considering the reorganization of the county, to bear in mind the distinction between purely local affairs and affairs of state concern such as the administration of justice, which can probably be best handled directly by the state.

Administering Justice

The administration of justice is a matter of state concern and should be entirely divorced from other county affairs. On the other hand, the courts should not be burdened with any share in the administration of the county considered as a unit for the satisfaction of local needs. The courts should not be called upon to appoint local administrative officers. Ofttimes in the past administrative duties have been unloaded on the courts in a seeming effort to get them out of politics.

Whether or not the county judge should be elected locally or appointed by the governor does not have to be decided here. The courts should have full administrative power over court officers and employees. For example, the clerk of court, the register of deeds, the recorder of wills, sheriff, etc., are administrative agents of the court and should be responsible to it. They should not be elected by the people and therefore left responsible to no one. The district or prosecuting attorney is likewise a state officer who, as in the case of United States attorneys, should be responsible to the central power. In drafting an organization plan for county government we do not need to include the courts. They are quite outside the range of a county charter.

The Urban County

The law should provide for the complete consolidation of existing county and city governments where their

boundaries are coterminous. Where a large city exists within but not coterminous with a county it should be separated from the county and made a city-county, as in the case of Denver. Only in this way can duplication of machinery and political sabotage be avoided.

Provisions should be placed in the constitution whereby a city on reaching a certain size, say 50,000 as in England, would be automatically separated from the county and become a consolidated city-county.

The Urban-Rural County

Most counties contain a mixed urban and rural population, and they perhaps offer the most difficult problem of all. The need is for a type of government which will protect and further the interests of both the urban and agricultural interests. The problem is to give proper representation to each factor and to keep the governing body small enough to secure all the advantages of the short ballot. A plan has been proposed by which municipalities within the county could be represented on the governing board by their mayor or chief executive officer, and the rural portions of the county represented by specially elected supervisors chosen either at large or by districts. This does not mean city-county consolidation such as is being proposed in Alameda county, California, at the present time. There the situation is different. The case we have in mind is the typical county, largely rural, but containing municipal corporations too small for separation from it.

It seems that any complete law containing optional county charters must provide for this type of government.

The Rural County

The purely rural county submits to easier treatment. Here the solution seems to be a small legislative body elected at large with power to appoint the chief administrator, the county manager. Township lines should be erased and surviving township officers, such as road supervisor or school directors or township assessors, should be abolished. The work now done by townships, in the maintenance of roads or education, could better be done by the county.

Suggested Plans

The County-Manager Charter. (1) An elective board of five to nine members of supervisors or commissioners in which all legislative powers of the county are vested. Incorporated areas above villages to be represented on the board by their mayor or similar officer with voting power, to be worked out on a basis proportionate to population.

(2) The county-manager to be chosen by the supervisors or commissioners for an indefinite term, subject to removal by majority vote. The county-manager to have the power of appointment and removal of subordinate administrative officers. A county civil service commissioner or commission for counties large enough to justify it, to be appointed by the governing body.

(3) The administrative organization of the county to be departmentalized as follows, the head of each department to be under the direct supervision of the county-manager, the county-manager himself to be head of one or more of the departments as the supervisors or commissioners may determine.

A. The department of finance, under which will be grouped the county treasury, county purchasing for all county needs, county tax assessor, and tax collector.

B. The department of public works, highways, bridges, drainage, county buildings, etc.

C. The department of public welfare and safety—poor relief, jail, health, police.

(4) A county auditor selected by the governing board.

The Supervisor or Commissioner-at-large charter. (1) A governing body similar in structure to the county-manager charter with full legislative power.

(2) A supervisor-at-large or county mayor who shall be the executive head of the county, with limited veto on county legislation and with power to

LOCAL DEMOCRACIES

The great America for which we long is unattainable unless the individuality of communities is far more highly developed and becomes a common American phenomenon.

For a century our growth has come through national expansion and the increase of the functions of the federal government. The growth of the future—at least the immediate future—must be in quality and spiritual value. And that can come only through the concentrated, intensified strivings of smaller groups.

The field for the special effort should now be the state, the city, the village. If ideals are developed locally the national ones will come pretty near taking care of themselves.—Justice Louis D. Brandeis, of the Federal Supreme Court.

appoint minor county officials. A county civil service or commission to be appointed by the governing body in counties large enough to justify it.

(3) Administrative organization to be departmentalized as in the manager-charter above.

The above is, of course, but a broad outline of county organization and one that would have to be modified somewhat to meet constitutional restrictions in every state which now has county home-rule.—H. W. Dodds, Secretary Committee on County Government of the National Municipal League.

COUNTY AFFAIRS

County government is a big affair in the United States. The year before the World War began it amounted to \$385,000,000, or about a third as much as the total expenses of the federal government.

And yet the average citizen knows little or nothing about county finances, about the tax list and the amazing inequities and delinquencies it discloses everywhere; about what county revenues are spent for, and whether they are spent wisely or unwisely, effectively or wastefully.

The annual county balance sheets required by law and given to the public in the county papers year by year in North Carolina are commonly unbusinesslike and meaningless. Frequently, the county financial exhibits are not published at all, as in some twenty counties of the state in 1916.

Annual Balance Sheets

Nobody knows how the county stands—not even the county commissioners, in many instances. Usually there is no exhibit under classified headings, and so nobody can tell exactly how much is spent for this or that purpose—say on paupers, the total number or the per capita cost; or on roads, the miles built, the average cost per mile of the different kinds of roads, the per capita daily cost of convicts, work animals and the like, and the share of the various townships in the expenditure for roads and bridges during the year.

The newspaper reports of accounts audited by the commissioners from time to time are full of typographical errors. Besides, they are a meaningless jumble of dates, names, and amounts that defy classification. We know, because for six years we have been trying to ascertain from these data how the tax moneys of one county are applied to the various departments of county welfare.

And, by the way, during these six years the commissioners of this county have given to the taxpayers no complete and detailed statement of county finances.

In another county only one annual county exhibit has been given to the public in twenty years. In other counties the taxpayers have had to get special audits by applying to the courts. And so on and on.

Undirected Democracy

North Carolina has no manual of instruction for county officers, as in a half dozen other states; no standardized forms of statement to indicate how county reports should be prepared and what they should contain; no uniformity in accounting, and no state-wide

audit system, as in Indiana and Ohio, and less effectively in twenty other states.

Government of the people, by the people, for the people in the counties of the United States is now a half-billion-dollar affair—in North Carolina something like an eight-million-dollar matter, and it needs intelligent oversight and direction in order to avoid huge waste.

Honest and Inefficient

Our county officers are good men and true. As a rule they are honest beyond all question; but are they also trained men of affairs, competent to manage the biggest single business in most of the counties of the country at large?

Wherever the business end of county affairs has come under strict review and pitiless publicity, amazing inefficiencies are disclosed. For instance, Alameda County, California, saved \$310,000 in one department in four years by a searching investigation of county business. In Indiana, since 1909, county officers have returned to the county treasuries the greater part of \$1,600,000 improperly paid them.

In Lee County, North Carolina, says the Sanford Express, the sheriffs from 1912 to 1916 received nearly \$1,600 more than the law allowed for the collection of taxes—doubtless quite innocently. Orange County, for a half year or so, supported two sheriffs—one on salary account and the other on a fee basis as tax collector. In Brunswick, the county farm in 1915 supported the county home and produced a small balance for the county treasurer. In 1914 the average acreage of the county homes in North Carolina was 150 acres, but an average of only 40 acres was in use, and the average net cost to the counties was around a thousand dollars each—some \$95,000 all told.

Common County Exhibits

The law in North Carolina calls for an exhibit of county finances in every county each year. In eighty counties last year these exhibits were given to the public in the county papers, in a few instances in pamphlet form.

Frequently, the newspapers carried these statements piecemeal. Instead of giving the entire exhibit in one issue of the paper, a half dozen issues or so carried the story of county finances. To get the whole report it was necessary to clip from week to week, file away carefully, and finally to assemble all parts for study—a tax upon attention that the average citizen is not equal to. That kind of thing makes the most alert taxpayer throw up his hands and quit. It is a capital way of befuddling the public mind. Commonly the typesetting and proof reading, or lack of proof reading, sprinkle the columns so thick with all sorts of errors as to make the whole thing useless for any purpose whatsoever.

In fewer than a dozen counties was there any proper assembling of county assets, county indebtedness, county receipts, and county expenditures for the various purposes of public welfare. The report of the county superintendent of schools is the only exhibit that approaches the necessary form, and sometimes the report on roads and bridges. Otherwise, the exhibit is usually unbusinesslike, and it passes understanding.

No wonder a country editor was moved to say the other day, "The annual county statement in my county is so absurd that I always feel like I'm robbing the county when I render a bill for printing it." But the money of the taxpayers will be wasted in this way for many years to come unless intelligent citizenship demands a businesslike annual statement of county finances.

A Worth-While Exhibit

We happen to have at hand a hundred copies or so of what strikes us as being a really worth-while kind of Financial Exhibit by a board of county commissioners. It is in booklet form, 3 1/2 by 6 inches, and it is mailed out yearly to every taxpayer in the county. The reader can stick it in his coat pocket and chew on it at his leisure in any odd moment.

It is so compact and simple that a wayfaring man can read it as he runs and gets some sense out of it about the money affairs of his county.

He can see the receipts in detail and

in toto. Under proper headings he finds just how much was spent for various purposes, to whom money was paid and what for down to the last cent—the total expenses of courts, juries, paupers, care and feed of prisoners, bridges, road building and repairs by townships, equipments and materials, interest, treasurer's commissions and so on and on.

It shows the miles of highway built, the average cost per mile, and the per capita daily cost of work-animals, convict labor, and hired labor. It shows at a glance what the bonded and floating indebtedness of the county is, and what the various expenditures have been, all under classified headings.

Uniform Accounting

In an exhibit of this sort the taxpayer has a chance to see where his county stands in its finances. And since the same forms of accounting are used year by year, he knows whether the commissioners are doing better or worse than former commissioners.

It is easy to see that if every county in a state were using the same form of annual exhibit, this or some other, the taxpayers would soon begin to know what counties were using public money to the best advantage, and what counties were wasting public funds.

As it is, there is no basis for comparison. In one county convicts engaged in road work cost \$1.13 a day, in another 95 cents, in another \$1.73. But we just stumble on these differences here and there; no published state report enables us to compare any county with every other in the details of county expense.

County bookkeeping ought to be uniform, and then the people might know in every county whether or not their commissioners were getting results or getting left.

But in North Carolina at present nobody is in any position to say whether or not the people are getting proper results from the millions the counties are spending on roads, or from the expenditures for any other county purpose.

We will send this little county booklet to anybody that wants it. Drop us a card. It is worth looking at closely.

Lack of Unified Headship

County government in North Carolina, such as it is, demonstrates the consequences of the lack of unity and responsible headship in county affairs.

The various county officials are elected by the same constituencies in each county. They stand upon a parity; each official, therefore, feels quite independent of all the other county officers; each department is separate and distinct; each conducts its business according to immemorial custom, quite regardless of law, each keeps a cash book account or not, just as it pleases. As a consequence, there is no county government in North Carolina that coheres as in an organic whole. As a matter of fact, the most apparent thing is incoherency and lack of unity.

The state, properly enough, defines county officerships, rights, duties, privileges, and so on; but the state exercises no supervision over county affairs, except over state taxes collected and transmitted by county authorities to the state treasury. The result is a minimum of state oversight in county affairs. We have, therefore, confusion worse confounded in county matters in North Carolina, which being translated means confounded confusion.

We are never likely to have unified county government unless we can have responsible headship in county affairs. A city has a mayor, but no county in North Carolina has any official to serve the county as a mayor serves a city. In some way county government must be unified under directive executive headship—under the county commissioners acting through a chairman as the designated head of county affairs, or under the county-manager plan, which works in city government and doubtless can be made to work in county government.

The Editor Adds

North Carolina is famous for its pioneer work in the improvement of county life and government, but the county is still a big problem. And it's the same elsewhere.—Municipal Quarterly Review, September 1921.