

Section 23

Governor Reagan's 1973 Task Force on Regional Government

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Section 23 (a)

The Task Force Report Reagan Didn't Buy

The task-force report Reagan didn't buy

In the parlance of Ronald Reagan's former profession, the report of the Governor's Task Force on Local Government Reform hit the cutting-room floor. The document is available for anyone who cares to read it, but it was issued without the imprimatur of the Governor, Lieutenant Governor Ed Reinecke (who was supposed to have supervised the study) or, for that matter, any high-ranking member of the administration. The report, which originally was to have been released for legislative consideration early this year, was transmitted six months late by Robert De Monte, director of the state Office of Planning and Research, to the Council on Intergovernmental Relations for a decent burial.

For months, the Governor's office had been struggling with the problems of how to handle the report, which most of all represented the philosophy of the task-force chairman, Robert B. Hawkins Jr., previously director of the state Office of Economic Opportunity. The \$270,000 study concluded that the existence of so many units of local government in California is an asset rather than a liability. Reagan's own preference — that local government be streamlined, perhaps through a merger of counties — was rejected. Two members of the task force, retired Pasadena City Manager John D. Phillips and retired Alameda County Administrator Earl Strathman, were not sympathetic with the Hawkins philosophy but elected not to file a minority report after getting word that the cabinet was not about to embrace the majority finding.

Before releasing the study, the governor's office submitted copies to the League of California Cities and the County Supervisors Association. These local-government organizations were highly critical of the report but found one major element of agreement — the contention that the federal and state governments had been preempting too many local-government functions, thereby eroding the principle of home rule. The report was a major disappointment to key members of the Governor's staff, including executive assistant Ed Meese and programs and policy aide Don Livingston, who had experience in local government. They had hoped that the task force would develop a plan for long-range reorganization of local government that could be presented to the Legislature and receive a reasonably warm welcome. Livingston said that the report was given the unusual low-key treatment because "we weren't sure they did all the research necessary to support some of the conclusions."

Had the Governor given the report strong support and unveiled it in theatrical manner, Hawkins' recommendations would not have seen the light of day in the Legisla-

ture, which wants fewer units of local government, not more. Assemblyman John T. Knox, the Legislature's leading local government specialist, paid no attention to progress of the study after learning the direction Hawkins was heading. As reported in January's *California Journal* ("Reagan task-force surprise," page 28), these are the major points contained in the 76-page Hawkins report:

- The issue of too many governments has been exaggerated. The figures are illusory. Although technically there are 4,703 units of government, 1,770 of these are subsidiaries of other governmental units and 196 are inactive. That leaves only 2,782 real units.
- The public has chosen this type of local government and likes it. There is no evidence that economies of scale are realized through consolidation; nor does increased size produce increased quality.
- Citizen participation (and satisfaction with government) decreases as the size of the governmental unit increases.
- Federal and state intervention has deprived local government of control while increasing administrative costs. Matching-fund programs have virtually forced local government to accept money, but it has also forced some agencies to raise taxes for projects that might otherwise not have been undertaken (while desired local programs were curtailed).
- No alternate set of county boundaries would, over the long run, necessarily be any better than the present ones. There is no need for regional governments, or even for integrated plans for each region.
- The state should be prohibited from passing costs on to local government. Local taxes should be revised with the fee-for-service concept expanded, and a flat-rate income tax should be considered as a replacement for part of the property tax. There should be much more local control over various federal and state "partnership" programs, and Washington should not be allowed to send funds directly to local government.
- Local Agency Formation Commissions, which now can approve or veto proposed new units of local government, should be weakened, and special districts should be represented on the commissions. A system should be enacted to provide for the division of present cities and counties.
- Regional problems should be solved through voluntary cooperation within councils of government (COGs), with special districts as full partners.
- Local government should be encouraged to contract for services with private industry. Jobs should be filled by competitive examination, eliminating promotional examinations limited to those already employed in a jurisdiction.

The report consistently takes the view that the lower the level of government the better, with special districts as the ideal. While this view will not play in Sacramento, it is surprising, in one sense, that the report was so clearly rejected by Reagan. Three of the task-force members and consultants played major roles in the task forces that developed the governor's highly publicized welfare-reform and tax-limitation plans. They are Charles D. Hobbs, who has held a variety of administration posts, and Professors W. Craig Stubblebine of Claremont and William A. Niskanen of Berkeley.

While the Hawkins report hit the cutting-room floor in the corner office, it will undoubtedly become a major campaign issue in November — but only in Sacramento County, where voters will decide a proposed new charter merging the City and County of Sacramento into a single government, much like San Francisco's. If Hawkins is right, this is exactly the wrong direction for local government to take in California — and the opponents of the new charter undoubtedly will employ his report in their drive to reject regional government in Sacramento.

Robert Hawkins

