

# Key to reforming state government is to think locally

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Californians are looking for a government as innovative and creative as the state they call home. We all want something to believe in, something that will bring about change without more gimmicks and old, tired ideas. Overhauling the constitution only makes sense if it empowers communities at the expense of a bloated Sacramento. Put simply: To succeed, government must be closer to the people, focused on solving problems, and organized to achieve better results.

We believe this is very possible and can be enormously popular with the public. If groups like ours, California Forward, and others, like the Bay Area Council, speak with the public, and listen to their ideas, then it's possible we could see fundamental constitutional change enacted in the November 2010 and November 2012 statewide elections. A real coalition would be formed from the ashes of what just went up in flames during last Tuesday's special election.

Our state's size and complexity are like most countries, yet our government structure is held together in Sacramento with the equivalent of duct tape and baling wire. Just one of our state senators is, today, responsible for representing nearly 1 million people. That kind of feeble representation does not work in a republic like California.

We can't blame our budget problems on the economy, either. The truth is: We weren't in such great shape to begin with. The recession simply laid bare problems that have simmered below the surface for years. Even in the best of times, Californians felt underserved and overtaxed by a state government that seems too big and too unresponsive.

At California Forward, we've visited with thousands of Californians; we've gone back to look at good ideas that were either overlooked, ignored or never adopted. We've done our homework. Here is what we've learned: Citizens have more say about, and more confidence in, local services they can see for themselves. In recent years, California government has grown in just the opposite direction – with dollars and decision-making focused in Sacramento – from funding for police to deciding the length of the school year.

Even the very best state government would be a poor substitute for a local school board or city council. As it is, Sacramento is like an absentee landlord, collecting and spending from a distance, with predictably bad results.

It's time to admit our state's long-distance micromanagement is a failure and to turn things on their head.

We can create a leaner, greener, more efficient state government by moving the tax authority and management of public programs to local governments. Move government closer to the people, and the state budget need not be such a gargantuan mess. Instead, the state can go back to what it should do best: ensuring that programs actually accomplish what they set out to accomplish, and kick-starting economic development.

What would a new California state government look like? For starters, it would be smaller, which would help our perpetual budgeting problems. But more important, it would stay small. The growth of California would take place at the local level, where it needs to grow. It would be managed more efficiently.

Sacramento would still have a major role in overseeing those services that make sense to deliver on a statewide basis, protecting the environment, ensuring equity and retooling our state to lead again on the global stage.

But the state's role is predicated on the simple fact that Californians need a system where tax dollars are allocated closer to the people, managed closer to the people and scrutinized by the people who are closest to the results.

Local officials need their own revenue sources and greater flexibility to adjust tax rates to reflect local needs and priorities. The majority of our state legislators were once city council members or county supervisors – they know that better public involvement, public oversight and public decision-making are happening at the city and county level.

Does your community want more police officers on the street? Bigger parks? A new senior center? Let's give communities a greater opportunity to chart their own course – and less need to lobby Sacramento for a budget earmark. We will need to make sure that low-income communities have adequate services, but we can explore state incentives for regional revenue sharing agreements as one way to ensure everyone has a shot at prosperity.

By overhauling California's relationship with local government, we can restore the connection between services and spending, and give communities the tools they need to decide what's worth paying for – and what they can do without.

California also must reform the political process to encourage rather than punish compromise and reward elected officials who seek to represent the long-term interest of everyone in their districts, over the immediate concern of narrow interests and extreme partisans.

There's serious work to do. It's not sexy, but it's necessary. And we've put it off long enough.

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