

E T C .

## County lines

To the right on this page of your favorite weekly newspaper is a proposal to allow Wisconsin counties to merge for reasons of governmental efficiency.

David Blaska, who formerly served on the Dane County Board of Supervisors, brought this up because, as you read, two eastern Wisconsin counties are considering merging due to their financial issues. Blaska proposes, for purposes of his blog exercise, reducing from 72 to 39 counties, including merging Grant, Lafayette and Iowa counties, along with Crawford, Vernon and Richland counties.

At 72 counties, Wisconsin has fewer than each of our neighbors. Iowa, smaller than Wisconsin in land size, has 99 counties (formerly denoted by two-digit vertical numbers on their license plates). Minnesota has 87 counties. Michigan has 83 counties. Indiana, close to Iowa in size, has 92 counties. Illinois has 102 counties, and, to no one's surprise, twice the number of units of government as Wisconsin.

Grant County, as I was told upon full-time arrival in 1988, is larger in land area than the state of Rhode Island. That was reinforced every time I had to go to Hazel Green, or Muscoda, or Patch Grove, and the other sides of the county are obviously farther from Platteville. If as Blaska suggests Lafayette and Iowa counties were to merge, that county would be larger than Grant County in land size.

Some more history: Lafayette County used to be part of Iowa County until Lafayette County was created in 1847, making it one year older than the state. Lafayette County also has the nation's only privately constructed courthouse, built in Darlington, which won the battle with Shullsburg to be the county seat. Iowa County reportedly is named not for the state of Iowa, but for the offshoot of the Sioux tribe, called "Iowa" or "Ioway." (Which explains why my grandmother pronounced the state "Ioway." Confusingly, the Iowa tribe has two reservations, neither in Iowa.)

The obvious issue of Blaska's proposal is the performance of county government functions. The principle is that GrantLafayetteIowa County would need one sheriff, district attorney, county clerk, county treasurer, register of deeds, coroner, human resources director and other administrators, not three each; one administrator, not two (Lafayette County doesn't have an administrator); and so on.

Lancaster, Darlington and Dodgeville are all county seats because they're right in the middle of Grant, Lafayette and Iowa counties, respectively. Services increasingly don't require a physical presence, but some still do. Even dividing services among three county seats would result in substantial travel from one part of GrantLafayetteIowa County to another for both residents and county employees.

I'm certain the chambers of commerce and business communities in Lancaster, Darlington and Dodgeville would vociferously oppose losing their county seat status. Wherever the courthouse is, such businesses as law firms and title companies can be found. And yet there is zero chance, even if the counties were to merge, of creating a new county seat in the most central point of the three counties, Livingston. (Or Arthur if you're counting unincorporated communities.)

One issue of county services that has come up during my time here is the size of county boards. Grant County had 32 supervisors in the 1980s, which was down from 68 in the 1960s. (The old board had one supervisor per town and village and one per city aldermanic district.) To have 32 supervisors in a county of 50,000 people seemed ridiculous, especially when county supervisors were getting county employee benefits, specifically health insurance. The county board dropped one seat, but fiscal responsibility prevailed and Grant County now has 17 supervisors, one more than Lafayette County, but four fewer than Iowa County, which has fewer than half the population of Grant County.

In fact, putting Lafayette and Iowa counties together

would result in a county bigger than Grant County in land size, but with slightly fewer people. (Along with arguments over whether the county seat should move from Darlington and Dodgeville to Mineral Point.) If you get rid of one or two counties, do you get rid of one or two county fairs?

Whether it's a good idea or not, it's a non-starter given that

there appears to be no interest in Grant or Lafayette or Iowa counties in such a merger. Whether a merger is a good idea or not, it brings up the related topic that there needs to be more sharing of government resources among units of government.

For instance, some small communities already are contracting with their county sheriff's department for police services instead of hiring their own officers. Another could be for towns to contract with their counties for highway service instead of buying their own trucks and hiring their own operators. Maybe

someday, very small school districts might share administrators, which has happened before in this state, but rarely.



Steve Prestegard  
editor@theplattevillejournal.com



## MADISON JOURNAL Lafayette—Iowa County?

by David Blaska  
davidblaska.com

The question arose back when Your Humble Squire was laboring at the Department of Revenue.

Lafayette County was hurting for revenue. Its population of 16,753 is less than Fitchburg's. The county, southwest of Dane County, responded by instituting a sales tax, which raises all of \$840,000 last year. That compares to \$54.9 million in Dane County.

Your Humble Squire thought at the time: Why couldn't Lafayette County merge with Iowa County to the north?

No county has ever merged with another. Now, apparently, Ozaukee and Washington counties are raising the possibility. Both counties are populous (Ozaukee: 88,314; Washington: 134,296). Both counties are wealthy Republican exurbs of Greater Milwaukee. Which means they recognize the value of a dollar and are not in thrall to More and Bigger Gummint.

WTMJ-TV in Milwaukee reports that Washington County, faced with budget troubles, is "thinking out of the box [including] dissolving county lines and completely merging with Ozaukee County. "I know that if we go down this path, that guys like me don't have a job but I'm good with that," the Washington County administrator said.

His county has already saved \$300,000 by merging its health department with Ozaukee and another hundred grand merging with the Waukesha County medical examiner.

The Washington County administrator sent a letter to four of its neighboring counties, letting them know about their fiscal health status.

Of Wisconsin's 72 counties, 71 had been formed by 1901 when most people

moved by horseback. The Menominee reservation was carved out of Oconto and Shawano counties in 1959 to create its own county, in an experiment that failed. It was intended to wean it off reservation status but 35 percent of the 4,533 population are mired in poverty. Florence County, the least populous county at 4,456, has not a single incorporated village or city. It's one of the smaller counties in surface area as well.

For comparison purposes, Dane County is home to 531,273 (2010 Census).

The stickler is that all counties must provide the same array of services: law enforcement, roads, courts, health, general welfare, property records, etc. It's a matter of economy of scale.

State law, specifically Chapter 59.08, provides for "consolidation" of counties, which is put to referendum. Let's explore consolidation in low-population Southwest Wisconsin, now divided among Grant (population: 52,214), Iowa (population: 23,654), and Lafayette (population: 16,753) counties for a combined 92,621. Lafayette County was cleaved from Iowa County in 1846. You could argue: leave Grant County alone. It's large and fairly populous, but let's go with the three-fer for this example.

County boards would take the lead. But if Lafayette County's board remained silent, for instance, voters could petition for a referendum in their county. If the its board still dragged its heels, a judge would appoint five citizens to work out the details with the merger partners. If the referendum on consolidation fails in any one of the counties, the whole deal goes down.

Although long state law, no county has ever merged. Instead, most of our counties were cleaved from existing

counties — originally just three in 1818: Crawford in the west, Brown in the east, and (encompassing the far north and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan) Michilimackinac.

The hard, cold numbers may argue for consolidation but emotions could scuttle the whole thing. First, what to call the new, consolidated county? Nothing wrong with "Iowa-Lafayette" county unless the Lafayetters insist on "Lafayette-Iowa." You see the problem! But the three-county merger we have imagined includes Grant County. That calls for a completely new, neutral name. "Driftless County"? "Lead County"?

But it raises the question even more likely to sabotage merger than the consolidated county's name: which city gets the county seat?

That question is particularly poignant in our three southwest county seats. Lancaster, Dodgeville and Darlington have glorious old courthouses and, frankly, not a whole lot else going for them. Could some functions could continue in each courthouse? The law specifies that the courts be consolidated at the county seat. But could the referendum specify all three as county seats? Our reading of 59.08 does not seem to rule out that possibility.

Existing sheriff's facilities could continue as precinct houses. Dane County has three such sheriff's precincts outside of Madison. If new, modern jails would be required, the merged county would need build only one, not three.

We could find no authorization to carve up one county between two neighbors, even though it would seem to make sense in some cases.

Blaska is a former member of the Dane County Board of Supervisors and a former reporter for The Capital Times in Madison.

## LETTERS

The Platteville Journal, P.O. Box 266, Platteville, WI 53818-0266 • editor@theplattevillejournal.com

## Power line coverage

Thanks to community newspapers like The Platteville Journal for publishing stories about very important local issues. For example, take the case of the Cardinal-Hickory Creek high-voltage transmission line proposed by American Transmission Co. and its corporate colleagues ITC Midwest, and Dairyland Power Cooperative.

The Wisconsin State Journal July 25 devoted nearly 100 column inches (equal to one full page) to a story about CHC by Business Editor Judy Newman. The State Journal story continued a tradition of many years wherein the would-be developers of CHC were depicted as protecting the best interests of us electric consumers, while simultaneously doing their darndest to save the environment.

That kind of misinformation is why local residents rely on community newspapers like The Platteville Journal.

Deep in her story (Paragraph 21 of 34), the State Journal writer casually mentioned that "more than 110 towns, villages and counties [in Wisconsin] ... have passed resolutions asking for a complete cost-benefit analysis comparing the big transmission line to alternatives such as boosting smaller power lines or using renewable energy sources." But she didn't bother to quote a single local elected official from among the dozens nearby, including the town boards of Arena, Wyoming, Clyde, and Vermont in Iowa and Dane counties, among many others. (The number of townships having passed similar resolutions and working together now numbers seven.)

Instead, the story described the Mid-continent Independent System Operator's outdated six-year-old plan for CHC as though MISO were a quasi-governmental

"authority." This reinforced the misinformed notion that MISO has actual jurisdiction over regional electricity needs when, in fact, MISO is made up of a group of regional utility interests.

In January, the elected chairs of town boards in Arena, Wyoming, and Vermont formally invited ATC, ITC and DPC to "a joint public meeting [in] March 2017, requested by the town boards." Plans were in place to hold the meeting at Arena Elementary School. Optional dates in March were offered. And the transmission companies were provided with advance copies of the types of questions they would be asked.

In February, the transmission companies flatly refused to meet, saying: "We simply do not have the resources to accommodate that scenario." The refusal was signed by Jon Callaway, ATC's local relations consultant. ATC's excuse noted the large number of towns, villages, cities and counties in the proposed path of CHC between Iowa and Middleton. "Agreeing to such a request from one municipality would practically obligate us to agree to such a request from all," Callaway wrote. All this was reported in a Home News story at the time.

Since refusing to meet with the townships, however, ATC has sent its community relations' employees to meet individually with a growing number of township and county officials in the proposed CHC paths.

As more citizens become aware of the real negative consequences posed by the Cardinal-Hickory Creek high transmission line proposal, thanks to coverage in newspapers like The Platteville Journal, the need for clear, truthful, and accurate answers from the transmission corporations will grow.

## Higher cig taxes work

A newly released report from the UW-Milwaukee Center for Urban Population recently confirmed that tobacco taxes are an effective strategy to prevent youth from starting tobacco use and giving users that extra push to quit.

The report looked at cigarette prices and sales in Wisconsin from 1970 through 2014, as well as adult smoking prevalence in the start. The report found a correlation between increasing the price of tobacco products and reduced consumption of those products.

The report goes on the state that increasing the price of other tobacco products like cigars, e-cigarettes, and smokeless tobacco may decrease their consumption. This is worth noting since these products' use of candy flavors and bright packaging makes them more appealing to young people.

I personally have done compliance checks locally and noticed that packaging for these products are in youth-attracting flavors like, bubble gum, cherry, blue raspberry. Additionally, the packaging is generally bright, full of color and often mimics products teens are using, such as chapstick, lip glosses, and other candy and novelty items.

This report can be read at [http://tobwis.org/files/download\\_file/032105eeb588cf2](http://tobwis.org/files/download_file/032105eeb588cf2). Southwest Alliance for Tobacco Prevention is always available to help answer additional questions, or provide education. As a reminder, tobacco users can get free help to quit using these products by calling 1-800-QUITNOW.

Carrie Blue

Program Coordinator, Southwest Alliance for Tobacco Prevention

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John Ingebritsen, Publisher

Editor Steve Prestegard  
[editor@theplattevillejournal.com](mailto:editor@theplattevillejournal.com)

Sports Editor Jason Nihiles  
[sports@theplattevillejournal.com](mailto:sports@theplattevillejournal.com)

Advertising Ann Rupp  
[ads@theplattevillejournal.com](mailto:ads@theplattevillejournal.com)

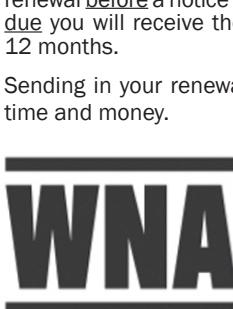
Ad Design Carol Tyson  
[design@theplattevillejournal.com](mailto:design@theplattevillejournal.com)

Bookkeeper/Receptionist Shirley Thalmann  
[accounts@theplattevillejournal.com](mailto:accounts@theplattevillejournal.com)

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