



THE CIVIC FEDERATION

2003 Legislative Priorities

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The Civic Federation is an independent, non-partisan government research organization founded in 1894. The Federation's membership includes business and professional leaders from a wide range of Chicago area corporations, professional service firms and institutions.

1. PROPERTY TAX ASSESSMENT APPEALS

Despite its controversial decisions, the jurisdiction of the Illinois Property Tax Appeals Board (PTAB) in Cook County should not be removed. The Civic Federation supports administrative reform of PTAB processes and ending over reliance on the Illinois Department of Revenue Assessment/Sales Ratio Studies for commercial and industrial property. However, Cook County businesses and other taxpayers should be allowed to continue seeking redress from incorrect assessments at PTAB. The Civic Federation has always maintained that the property tax assessment appeals system must provide a plain, speedy and efficient remedy to an incorrect assessment. The existence of PTAB in Cook County is a means of achieving this objective.

2. PUBLIC EMPLOYEE PENSIONS

As a result of the dire budget conditions of the State, past funding inadequacies, and the current historically low interest rates, The Civic Federation supports Governor Blagojevich's proposal to issue bonds to meet the State's past pension obligations. The state legislature must be mindful of the pension benefits granted to public employees at both the State and local level. The liabilities of State and local governments could dramatically increase as a result of increasing the benefits provided by these plans or decreasing the retirement ages of employees. During this time of declining government revenue, increasing the amount of revenue that any government must dedicate to pension funds threatens other programs and services.

3. ILLINOIS TOLL HIGHWAY AUTHORITY

The Illinois Toll Highway Authority must rebuild its aging toll roads and regain the public trust. The most preferable way to finance the reconstruction of the toll roads is through small, incremental increases in the tolls. Any increase in tolls must be dedicated to rebuilding the existing roads. It is counterproductive and fiscally irresponsible to build new extensions before guaranteeing the integrity of existing roads. Issuing bonds to pay for rebuilding would allow for smaller toll increases and effectively guaranteeing that all increases are used for rebuilding. In addition, the Toll Highway Authority should be mandated to provide independent verification of its revenues, road conditions, and financial plans.

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4. CHARTER SCHOOLS

The Civic Federation supports the removal of the current limits on the number of charter schools in Chicago and the rest of Illinois. In 1995, the Federation endorsed the original legislation authorizing charter schools. We continue to encourage experimentation in the administration of public services and educational reform to improve the quality of services while limiting the burden on businesses and other taxpayers.

5. COOK COUNTY FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT

The Civic Federation is opposed to merging the Cook County Forest Preserve District with the County government. Merging the two governments would allow the Forest Preserve District to circumvent tax cap legislation, thereby diminishing its public accountability. The Civic Federation believes that there should be a full separation between Cook County and the Forest Preserve District. A seven-member Board of Commissioners should be independently elected and serve in a part-time and volunteer capacity. The General Superintendent should also be given the independence necessary to run the District without undue interference from the Board.

6. STATE SALES AND INCOME TAX ISSUES

As the State of Illinois looks for ways to balance its budget, it should not attempt to balance its budget by decreasing the allocations currently reserved for local governments. The Civic Federation opposes reductions in local government distributive formulas for revenues collected by the State. Removing or reducing such essential revenues will put undue pressure on many financially challenged local governments whose likely recourse will be to raise property taxes.