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Talking Points: Make effort now to stem local aid cuts or the future may not be pretty

By: [Tom Larson](#), Morris Sun Tribune

The bites the State of Minnesota are taking from local governments' budgets aren't necessarily getting bigger, but each of them tears a little more flesh from the bone.

Mayors, city council members and county commissioners are in full lobbying mode right now, trying to convince state legislators and Gov. Mark Dayton that continuing to slash at Local Government Aid and Homestead Market Value Credit isn't the best way to bolster the state's economy.

With every cut made by the state -- and there have been a few in recent years -- local taxes either go up or those taxpayers do without a growing list of services and personnel. With few exceptions, the rule of thumb in most households and businesses is that when taxes go up investments and consumer spending go down.

Granted, the state is in a heck of a hole -- a \$5 billion pit -- and there are no easy ways to fill it. And when the hole is big, you go to the biggest pile of dirt. Aid to local governments is by no means the state's biggest pile but it's nothing to sneeze at.

But this kind of belt-tightening isn't about getting Stevens County to cut out a couple of movie nights each month, or maybe Morris not taking Donnelly out for dinner and dancing as often.

Thanks to watchful taxpayers and astute local leadership, there's very little, if anything, in any city's or county's budget that can be considered fat. Their missions are getting your streets and roads plowed, your parks mowed and your storm sewers unclogged when it rains too hard.

They make sure your tap water is clean and that the stuff in your sanitary sewers eventually ends up that way, too. They put out your fires and show up when somebody's broken into your garage.

If there are any more "essential services" for a citizenry that pays handsomely for them, it's not clear who's performing them.

Morris Mayor Sheldon Giese joined a few others city officials, including Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, to talk over the situation this week in Alexandria.

Here's the lowdown for Morris residents that Giese shared with his counterparts:

- Morris' anticipated aid cuts for 2011 are \$314,366 or about 13 percent of the city's LGA and market value credit.
- With the estimated aid cuts for 2011, the city will have lost about \$1 million since December 2008.
- LGA represents 68 percent of Morris' General Fund and Library fund budgets.
- The 2011 General Fund and Library Fund budgets total \$3,594,586. The city's LGA and HMVC total is \$2,424,610.
- The city has frozen wages for one year and anticipates freezing wages for a second year.
- The city has reduced one full-time equivalent of labor and estimates that it may need to cut three FTE positions if more aid cuts are made.
- The city has reduced support for the library, community education and economic development.
- The city is reducing the quality of maintenance in some areas like parks.
- The city has increased fees for most services to include implementing a fire response fee for all residents in the city limits.
- The city is considering a storm water utility fee to help pay for storm sewer maintenance.
- The city has cut back considerably on travel and conferences.

It's hard to get people excited -- or, more appropriately, ticked off -- about this issue until the day comes that they can't get a building permit or the cops can't get to you lickety-split because there are fewer of them in uniform.

But those days could be coming and, as is seemingly always the case, it's much tougher to get the money back than it is to keep it in the first place.

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