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Third Sunset Review of County Government Completed

Dated June 30th, 2014, the County Manager's sunset review of County departments and agencies fulfills requirements in the Home Rule Charter and the County's Administrative Code to analyze County departments and agencies and determine if there should be changes—whether to continue as is, abolish, or reorganize them.

After reviewing the legal mandate, the public need, alternative methods of delivery, the effectiveness, and other factors the Manager makes the recommendation as to what should happen to the department. The sunset review goes to County Council for consideration and they may act on the Manager's recommendations to determine what happens with the departments and agencies by mid-October.

The point of the sunset review is to justify the existence of the components of County government and submit them to an up or down vote so that the existence is not assumed to continue into perpetuity.

Recall that the first sunset review was done in 2003 and the second came seven years after, well past the cycle set out in the Charter and the Code. That the 2014 review was done on time and contains a table that demonstrates how subsequent reviews of departments and agencies will be scheduled on a staggered basis to achieve the four year cycle is to be commended and gives a measure of confidence that the Charter and requirements in the Administrative Code as they pertain to the sunset review will be followed going forward.

When the first sunset review was conducted in 2003 there were 16 operating departments. When voters approved a referendum to eliminate six row offices, three new departments (Court Records, Medical Examiner, and Real Estate) became County departments. Last year parts of Public Works and Administrative Services were split off to form Facilities Management.

Departments Subject to 2014 Sunset Review	
Administrative Services	Kane Regional Centers
Budget and Finance	Law
Court Records	Medical Examiner
Economic Development	Minority/Disadvantaged/Women
Emergency Services	Parks
Facilities Management	Police
Health	Public Defender
Human Resources	Public Works
Human Services	Real Estate
Jail	Shuman Center

Based on the 2013 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report, the full-time equivalent (FTE) headcount of the departments represents 75 percent of total County employment (5,118 out of 6,879.5). Sunset reviews don't cover the Court of Common Pleas (1,140 FTE), the row offices (the remaining four—District Attorney, Controller, Treasurer and Sheriff—had 583.5 FTE) nor the Executive, County Council, or the Manager's office (38 FTE). Since 2008, of the departments that did not absorb new functions or split off part of their functions to other ones, the biggest jump in FTE was at the Jail (24 FTE) and the biggest decrease was at Shuman Center (16 FTE).

The current review makes one department elimination recommendation. It recommends that the Department of Real Estate be absorbed into the Department of Administrative Services. The latter is currently handling functions related to elections, weights and measures, veterans' affairs, and property assessment and the former carries out the functions that was handled by the Recorder of Deeds. If that reorganization happens, and, assuming no new departments are created, there will be 19 operating departments in County government and employees of one department will transfer to another.

On alternative ways of carrying out departmental functions, in some areas the review is open to the concept of turning functions over to alternative arrangements that could involve the private sector, multi-county arrangements, or the state (Emergency Services, Health, and Medical Examiner) while in other places there is a skepticism about contracting out services (Administrative Services, Budget and Finance, and Facilities Management) as the belief that there would be negative impacts, higher costs, or inefficiencies. It is not clear if these statements were made based on actual bids based on RFPs or inquiries to examine what it would cost to carry out the stated duties. That's a place County Council should investigate through hearings before making its decision on the recommendations in the review.

While it will be another four years until the next sunset review, the County Charter requires the County to convene its second government review commission in 2015. The last one met in 2005 (five years after the effective date of the Charter) and is to meet every ten years thereafter to "...study the Charter and County government, including the organization, practices, and responsibilities of all County departments and agencies". Whereas the sunset review is conducted directly by County personnel, the review commission is made up of nine appointees who are not part of County government and

may recommend Charter amendments to be placed on the ballot. That commission ought to be made up of taxpayer friendly people and people open to major changes.

The Allegheny Institute continues to believe non-core government functions that can be outsourced should be looked at seriously. It is incumbent on County officials to work on behalf of taxpayers to keep costs as low possible. With tax burdens rising because of pension and other issues at the state level and in the school districts, the County should lead the way in demonstrating innovative ways to cut costs.

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