State oppresses local municipalities

Whatever their shortcomings, the Pottstown School Board and Pottstown Council always pass balanced budgets on time, as required by state law.

The Pennsylvania legislature is also required to pass a balanced budget, by July 1 of each year. It seldom does.

This year it took until November to balance this year’s $32 billion budget, and it did so with such horrible fiscal practices as borrowing $1.5 billion against money tobacco companies are supposed to pay the state in coming years, and by expanding gambling.

The state legislature can be as irresponsible as it wants, but local school districts and municipalities still have to follow the rules it sets down.

A famous example is an unfunded mandate on public school pensions, which the legislature increased by 25 percent in 2001 without any realistic idea of how to pay for it. Today one-third of school district payroll expenses go for pensions.

The biggest expense for local municipalities is police. Amazingly, townships and boroughs — even small cities — are not required to provide police protection. But it would be unthinkable in places like Pottstown.

Municipalities with their own police force have double the taxation of those without police, according to a study by the Pennsylvania Economy League. About half the state’s municipalities rely on free service by the state police — freeloaders on everybody else.

This year, Gov. Wolf unsuccessfully proposed a $25-per-person fee on municipalities relying on 24-hour state police protection.

Another state mandate that escalates the cost of local police is Act 111, which requires binding arbitration between municipalities and their police and fire company unions. Under binding arbitration, a neutral arbitrator decides the contract provisions, including wages and benefits, which are then binding on the municipality with no avenue of appeal. The arbitrator does not have to take into account the municipality’s ability to pay.

The only option for towns like Pottstown with spiraling salary costs is simply to cut the size of the police force, as Reading has done.

Commentary by Thomas Hylton

SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE — Nearly 30 years after this editorial cartoon was published in The Mercury, the legislature is still burdening local school districts and municipalities with unfunded mandates.

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