



# THE PLAIN DEALER

THE COST OF GOVERNMENT

## **\$3,750 per person and rising fast**

**Separate ruling bodies eat up billions in tax dollars while dragging down the region's economy, critics say**

Monday, July 14, 2008

**Tom Breckenridge**

**Plain Dealer Reporter**

A behemoth lies in our midst, sucking in ever greater amounts of cash and growing at twice the rate of inflation.

What's more, we're feeding it with billions and billions of tax dollars. An unprecedented study released today shows that the combined cost of government across 16 northeastern Ohio counties -- teaching our children, running our cities and tending myriad other public services -- had reached at least \$16 billion by 2002.

That amounted to \$3,750 for every man, woman and child in the targeted region, which includes counties including Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Medina, Portage and Summit.

The \$175,000 study, paid for by civic and business leaders to gauge government spending, used the latest available U.S. census data to look at 800 publicly funded entities in the region.

And while the numbers are dated and incomplete, they suggest our system of governance is bloated and drags down the region's economy, according to the people who commissioned the study. "The expensive, fragmented local government system we have costs money," says David Abbott, board chairman for the Fund for Our Economic Future, an economic development philanthropy. "Some of that could be redirected to make us more globally competitive -- to early childhood or college education, or directly to economic development efforts."

The study shows that governmental spending -- including programs using state and federal dollars -- rose 68 percent between 1992 and 2002. That's more than double the 29 percent rate of inflation. Yet the region's population grew just 1 percent in those 10 years.

The actual costs are even higher, researchers emphasized. Nearly 200 government entities in the region failed to file Census of Government reports in 2002. One reason for the high cost is the duplication of services -- 219 governments paying for fire protection, 250 for police and 318 for streets and public works.

"Does anybody think that if you started from scratch, this is what you would develop as the most effective form of government?" said Abbott, appointed last week to a state-sanctioned panel studying reforms to Cuyahoga County government. "I doubt it."

Joe Roman, head of the region's largest chamber of commerce, said the study is a "call for all of us to make how we spend our government dollars a very, very high priority."

Numerous trends and findings emerge from the research. Compared with other regions, our cost of government is on the high end. More than \$1 of every \$3 spent by public entities goes to schools. And the cost of justice is skyrocketing.

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## About the study on government spending

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### About the study

The study uses U.S. census data to look at government spending in 16 Northeastern Ohio counties and in five other regions.

Who paid? The Fund for Our Economic Future, the region's largest economic development philanthropy, covered most of the \$175,000 study, done by the Center for Governmental Research in Rochester, N.Y. Also contributing were the Samuel H. and Maria Miller Foundation, the George Gund Foundation, the Greater Cleveland Partnership, the Canton Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Youngstown/Warren Regional Chamber.

What was the point? Government collaboration on services was identified as a top priority during the fund-sponsored Voices and Choices initiative in 2006, when thousands of residents spoke out on regional needs.

Who was included? The counties of Ashland, Ashtabula, Carroll, Columbiana, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Richland, Stark, Summit, Trumbull and Wayne.

Where are the findings? Go to links at [futurefundneo.org](http://futurefundneo.org) or [gcpartnership.com](http://gcpartnership.com).

SOURCE: Fund for Our Economic Future

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