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Public Policy Forum receives national award for Milwaukee County research

MILWAUKEE, Wisconsin – *Friday, July 29, 2011* – The Public Policy Forum’s comprehensive research report on the restructuring of Milwaukee County government received national recognition from the Governmental Research Association (GRA) at the GRA’s annual conference in Chicago this week.

The Forum received the GRA award for “Most Effective Education” on a local government issue for its January 2010 report entitled “*Should it Stay or Should it Go? Exploring the Potential for Structural Reform in Milwaukee County Government*”. The 159-page report included analysis of the roots of Milwaukee County’s financial distress; a detailed review of its mandated and discretionary activities and responsibilities; fiscal modeling of three restructuring scenarios; and analysis of Massachusetts’ experience with eliminating county governments.

“The report started with the simple question of whether the time had come to ‘blow up’ Milwaukee County government,” says Forum President Rob Henken. “We decided to use that research charge as an opportunity to educate citizens about what services the county provides, why it historically has been the government that provides them, and why the services are legally required and/or desired by policymakers and citizens.”

The report did so by methodically analyzing, function by function, every aspect of county government, and explaining what it would take to transfer each of the county’s responsibilities to other levels of government. It also looked at the legal and political barriers to such a transfer, as well as the benefits and limitations of each potential alternative level of governance.

In addition, the report defined and measured the largest obstacle to dismantling county government: the legacy costs associated with retired county workers.

“We determined that those legacy costs, a major portion of the county’s operations budget, would not go away even with the disappearance of county government,” says Henken. “That finding, combined with our analysis of the size and scope of the county’s legacy challenge, have been instrumental in driving subsequent deliberations about Milwaukee County’s future.”

The report concluded by presenting county officials and citizens with insights into four policy decisions that require resolution whether or not large-scale governance reform is pursued:

- Whether to continue to provide certain discretionary services, such as parks.
- How to address legacy costs with consideration of programmatic needs and priorities.
- Creating a plan for the county’s physical assets.
- Alternative approaches to government reorganization.

Several of the policy options presented by the Forum are being pursued by policymakers and civic leaders, including preparation of a master facilities plan, and formal discussion of municipal shared services initiatives.

The GRA was founded in 1914 as the national organization of individuals involved in government research. GRA’s annual awards competition is conducted to “recognize exceptional research on state and local governmental issues performed by staff members of governmental research agencies.”

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

The award-winning report – which was commissioned and funded by the Greater Milwaukee Committee – can be downloaded [here](#).