

Arizona Town Hall yields calls for reform

by **Mary Jo Pitzl** - Nov. 8, 2009 12:00 AM
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Arizona's finances are in such a mess and the people in charge of it in such disarray that the state may need to change its constitution to put things right.

The radical call to consider a constitutional convention - Arizona has had only one, back when it became a state - is one of a myriad of recommendations aimed at state government from the recently concluded Arizona Town Hall. But the group of 200-plus residents is only the latest to size up the state's spiraling budget deficits and conclude fundamental changes are needed.

In recent months, civic groups such as the O'Connor House Project and think tanks such as the Morrison Institute at Arizona State University, have called for changes to the laws and constitutional provisions that guide Arizona's budget process. They're alarmed at the protracted and growing budget deficits and the overtime battles between lawmakers and Gov. Jan Brewer over how to resolve them - a situation that has left Arizona staring at a \$2 billion deficit four months after the state was supposed to have a balanced budget in place.

The calls for change are aimed squarely at the state Capitol, but whether they will hit their mark remains to be seen. Asking a group to reform itself is a dicey proposition, and Town Hall attendees were careful to craft their recommendations so as to not offend lawmakers.

Others expressed hope that legislators would accept the Town Hall report in the constructive spirit in which it was being offered.

Legislators, for their part, have not yet seen the Town Hall recommendations, which will be formally presented later this year. Still, reactions at being the object of so much criticism varied.

One Town Hall participant said "the state needs an enema" to cleanse its system and start over.

Senate President Bob Burns, who planned to attend the Town Hall but backed out due to scheduling conflicts, said he doesn't take the reports and conferences as a personal critique.

"I don't necessarily feel like I'm under attack," said Burns, R-Peoria, "But again, you've got to consider the source."

He questioned how many of the Town Hall participants were on the receiving end of state programs and grants, the very things threatened with reduction or elimination.

"There are hundreds of other citizens out there who don't go to the Arizona Town Hall," he said. "And the reason they don't go is they have their noses to the grindstone, trying to make ends meet."

House Majority Leader John McComish, R-Phoenix, said the calls for change make sense in a theoretical context. But, he argued, the Legislature isn't structured to deal with many of the wide-ranging proposals.

"The think tanks can think about it, but then we're the action people," he said of the 90-member Legislature. "As currently structured, that's impossible."

And there's the Catch-22, he said, as a Legislature designed to be part-time with a short-term mission to produce a budget is being called upon to be more sophisticated, deal with long-range planning and put more time into the job.

And then there's the political reality that although the Legislature is being asked to initiate changes ranging from ending term limits to abolishing the supermajority requirement for tax increases, voters ultimately have to approve such moves. And the voters, McComish said, approved the very things that groups now want to abolish.

"Right now, the people don't want to change the things that tie our hands," he said. He pointed specifically to the Voter Protection Act, which bars lawmakers from making changes to voter-approved initiatives unless they can muster a three-quarters vote and ensure the change advances the cause of the initiative. Modifying or abolishing the act is high on the lists of possible reforms.

Rep. Tom Chabin, D-Flagstaff, was the only lawmaker to attend the Town Hall. He said some of his colleagues will be offended by proposals based on a belief that the Legislature has failed in its job. Others, he said, will be stimulated.

And, he added, many of the ideas already are percolating among lawmakers: "Given the crisis we have in Arizona, I think many members are already thinking about it."

Sen. Jonathan Paton, R-Tucson, echoed that thought. Calls to reform the Voter Protection Act, create a lieutenant-governor post and restructure legislative districts have been broached recently in the Legislature, although for varying reasons, they went nowhere.

Paton, who is involved in the O'Connor House Project which is eyeing government reforms, said any reform effort still needs intensive lobbying.

"It all boils down to 'Do they work their vote?' " he said. "You still have to wait out in the hall and pester people."