

## **The West Wing**

*Local Government from EGF and Beyond*

---

## **LGA and the New Buffalo Commons**

Posted on July 19, 2011 by Scott Huizenga

The State of Minnesota is about three weeks into its first shutdown since 2005. It appears that the end is near, but I will wait until the votes are cast. During the regular legislative session, the parties debated back and forth regarding which programs were priorities – the omnipresent “wants versus needs” debate. As July 1 came and went, discussion focused less on which programs were unimportant. As everything from state parks, to rest areas, to liquor permitting has been lost due to the shutdown, we are finding that maybe government does more than we thought.

Most frame the debate in a traditional DFL vs. Republican context. This stands to reason given that the sitting Governor is a DFLer who favors more revenue (i.e. taxes), whereas the Legislative majority leaders are Republicans who favor budget cuts. The divide ultimately may be more than simple ideology or party affiliation. The more critical schism that Minnesota and several states face is urban versus rural populations. Or, perhaps more specifically, urban versus suburban versus rural.

To (over)simplify, many suburban representatives feel that local areas should be self-sufficient. Suburbs – especially in the outer rings – tend to have high property wealth. And, perhaps they resent the perceived state subsidies granted to the urban centers and to the rural parts of the state especially during tough economic times. The current debate is whether or not urban and rural areas should be left to fend for themselves. Many North Dakotans living barely a hop and skip from East Grand Forks may recognize this debate as a reincarnation of the [Buffalo Commons](#) theory. Buffalo Commons held, in essence, that vast sections of the Great Plains and western states lacked the economic diversity to sustain a thriving base for large-scale development. The radical vision developed by Frank and Deborah Popper held that areas of low population density should be allowed to return to their natural states; and that western expansion should be abandoned in favor of a return to large urban centers that are more efficient economically and environmentally. The Buffalo Commons argument carries a large environmental premise, but one should not ignore its economic consequences.

When political leaders talk about reducing or eliminating property wealth transfer programs such as Local Government Aid (LGA), County Program Aid, and rural school assistance, they are in short talking about a form of the Buffalo Commons approach. Similarly, when the same leaders discuss creativity in terms of large-scale government consolidation, they refer to areas that encompass areas too wide to be self-sustaining in their own rights. In fact, consolidation actually makes more economic sense in the wealthier metropolitan areas, [as an April post from the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities explains](#).

The devil’s advocate for this neo-Buffalo Commons approach states following: Rural, agricultural areas are not economically efficient when they masquerade as urban centers. The traditional function of rural cities has been to serve as markets for agricultural economies. Cities are not entitled to libraries, swimming pools, paved streets, and recreation programs simply because they are incorporated within the State of Minnesota. The “Minnesota

The position of the devil's advocate is perfectly legitimate in many ways from an efficiency perspective. Elected officials and policy advocates should be honest about what they propose as they embark on the self-sustaining path. Significant cuts to Local Government Aid (LGA) will likely encompass a part of the final budget solution to end the shutdown. Rural cities are asked to make very difficult choices in public expenditures. If the Minnesota Miracle is over, rural residents will simply have to live without the amenities that suburbanites enjoy. In other words, rural areas can pay for their own swimming pools, libraries, hockey programs, etc. Or, they can move to the Cities. That scenario is Buffalo Commons – pockets of diverse metropolitan areas with vast expanses of little development.

And, finally, what about those wealthy suburbs? What kinds of government assistance do they receive? Did they spontaneously create themselves in the perfect storm of economic versatility? There are many sociological reasons for the rise of the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s. But, many argue eloquently that enormous state and federal subsidies – especially in the form of highways, bridges and interchanges – in the post-World War II economies have allowed the suburbs to flourish. But, that is an esoteric debate best left for another discussion (see [Strong Towns](#) for much, much, more on that issue).

For now, the rhetoric represents two diametrically opposed viewpoints. When the [tax chair House Property Tax Division Chair states her committee's intention to "phase out LGA,"](#) we are no longer dealing in hyperbolic politics. Rural and urban core cities of the state are facing potential cuts of 30-60 percent of their annual budgets. The debate is real and honest. And, it is happening right now.



**About Scott Huizenga**

City Administrator East Grand Forks, Minneosta [www.twitter.com/Scott\\_Huizenga](http://www.twitter.com/Scott_Huizenga)

[View all posts by Scott Huizenga →](#)

This entry was posted in [State Government](#) and tagged [2011 Legislature](#), [Local Government Aid \(LGA\)](#), [Minnesota](#), [shutdown](#), [Strong Towns](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

## One Response to *LGA and the New Buffalo Commons*



**Frank Popper** says:

July 20, 2011 at 9:01 am

Analysis is correct, excellent and imaginative. Anyone wanting more information on the Buffalo Commons should go to my Rutgers website, [policy.rutgers.edu/faculty/popper](http://policy.rutgers.edu/faculty/popper). The only national organization specifically devoted to creating the Buffalo Commons is the Texas-based Great Plains Restoration Council, [gprc.org](http://gprc.org), whose executive director is Jarid Manos, [greatplains@gprc.org](mailto:greatplains@gprc.org). Disclosure: I chair its board. Another group that advocates for deep-rural America is the New Mexico-based National Center for Frontier Communities, [frontierus.org](http://frontierus.org), whose executive director is Charlie Alfero, [calfero@hmsnm.org](mailto:calfero@hmsnm.org). Best wishes,

Frank Popper

Rutgers and Princeton Universities

[fpopper@rutgers.edu](mailto:fpopper@rutgers.edu), [fpopper@princeton.edu](mailto:fpopper@princeton.edu)

732-932-4009, X689

**areavoices**

[Log In](#)

[Sign Up](#)

[Blog Authors](#)

[Visit](#)

**The West Wing**

*Proudly powered by WordPress.*