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Daniels defends streamlining during discussion in Lafayette

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Government consolidation and property tax caps were Gov. Mitch Daniels' top discussion priorities on his stop Friday in downtown Lafayette.

The governor fielded questions for nearly an hour at the Lafayette Theater, and tried to drive home his support for making permanent the state's new property tax caps and streamlining local government.

"We have to do all we can to see that the last brick in the protective wall, the wall protecting Hoosier taxpayers, is put in place," Daniels said of his efforts to amend the Indiana Constitution to include tax caps.

Numerous township and county officials attended to voice their opposition to the 2007 report from former Gov. Joe Kernan and Chief Justice Randall Shepard, which recommends consolidation of local government.

"How can you assure the rural counties that we're not going to lose representation?" Kendall Culp, a Jasper County commissioner asked the governor. "I have a lot of people coming to me and the quote is, 'Don't sacrifice my democracy in the name of efficiency.' "

But Daniels continued to make his case for the elimination of the township level of government and the consolidation of each county's three commissioners into a single county executive position.

Even in rural counties such as Jasper, Daniels argued, the single county executive would still have to be attentive to the needs of all residents to stay in office.

The governor also argued that most residents can't even name their township or county elected officials.

Neal Scarlett, a Tippecanoe County resident, said he can understand the resistance from township officials, but he said he believes the governor is on the right track.

Jon Held of West Lafayette disagreed and told Daniels, "In so many ways you are 'my man.' But, you are in a ditch when it comes to Kernan-Shepard."

Daniels heard from several landlords at Friday's event about the burden they face from property taxes, largely because their rental properties don't qualify for homeowner discounts.

State Rep. Sheila Klinker, D-Lafayette, said the concerns of property owners are a main reason that House Speaker Pat Bauer, D-South Bend, is hesitant to move forward with amending the state Constitution this year to include tax caps.

The House of Representatives would have to pass the measure a second time this session to put the issue on Indiana ballots for voters to ultimately decide.

State Rep. Randy Truitt, R-West Lafayette, said he hopes common sense prevails and the leadership in the Democratic-controlled House allows the issue to come up for a vote.

Other issues

Among the hundreds of residents who turned out for the town hall meeting, some had other issues in mind.

Daniels fielded questions on education funding, unemployment figures and the future of green technology in Indiana.

Federal stimulus funds flowing into the state will increase educational operating funding for the next two years, Daniels said. But he admitted the state will need to "smooth over" the funding drop off that will occur after that point.

The governor promised one woman in the audience that his office would look into her lagging disability claim with the state.

Daniels also promised that even with the sagging economy, unemployment benefits will be given out to everyone who qualifies.
