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## Toward better Bay State governance

By Michael Kane and Shawni Littlehale

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In his recent State of the State address, Massachusetts Governor Romney again made government reform the underpinning for bringing the state's budget under control. Through its annual Better Government Competition, the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research, a Massachusetts think tank, has shown the value of government reform.

Inefficiency, waste and redundancy in government have real costs, not just in dollars and cents, but also in services not rendered, messages not received, and opportunities wasted. Days spent waiting in lines and playing phone tag are days that could have been spent raising a family, building a business, or working on a job site.

Also, many government agencies have larger structural inefficiencies that can cause waste and difficulty for the citizen who depends on them.

Here at the Pioneer Institute, we believe that the best ideas for fixing government can come from the people to whom government belongs -- the citizens of the commonwealth. To that end, we are conducting our 13th annual Better Government Competition. Each year, academics, lawyers, teachers, retirees, government employees, and people from countless walks of life submit their ideas to improve government.

From this group, winners are selected and published, and these ideas are presented to legislators and other state officials on Beacon Hill.

Since 1991, this competition has been an important source of ideas for the commonwealth. The ideas generated by this competition have saved Massachusetts taxpayers an estimated \$300 million over the life of the contest.

The competition proved its worth early on when the proposed Deer Island water-treatment plant to clean up Boston Harbor was still being planned. A group of scientists and engineers, including one at MIT, took a look at the proposed treatment process and suggested modifications that were eventually adopted and significantly reduced the overall price tag of the plant.

Other ideas, while saving less in the way of money, have sought to improve existing services, making government more responsive to the citizenry. For example, an honorable-mention winner from last year's competition, written by Grace Marie and Joyce Tomaselli, increased public awareness that many senior citizens were being permanently committed to nursing homes before this was necessary.

Some government-reform proposals have resulted in both cost savings and improved delivery of government services. In 1994, a former official of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue wrote a paper that was not only the model for major changes in how Massachusetts handled child-support enforcement, but also provided ideas adopted by Congress as part of welfare reform.

Ideas that we now consider common sense were new to Massachusetts when they first were declared Better Government Competition winners. For example, in 1999, Lenore and Skip Schloming, of the Small Property Owners Association, wrote a winning proposal, later taken on as a cause by the Cellucci administration, suggesting that tenants alleging code violations by landlords place their rent money into an escrow fund, to be released or returned depending on the outcome of legal proceedings.

Citizens pay taxes, use state services, drive on state highways, and interact with Massachusetts government agencies and activities on a daily basis. They know when trains are late, courts are slow, and paperwork is convoluted. They also often know when there is a better way to get the job done.

Teachers often know when educational policy is not helping them to give their students the knowledge they need. Train conductors and commuters often know when rules and procedures are preventing them from providing or receiving the most reliable commute possible.

Massachusetts's citizens are not only consumers, they are also the eyes and ears on the ground that are in the best position to see what can be improved.

Massachusetts faces another \$1 billion deficit. Governor Romney has pledged to maintain essential services while not raising taxes. This will mean that government must be as efficient and intelligent as possible with its resources.

If you have an idea for improving Massachusetts government, no matter how small you think that the issue is, you can submit it to our contest. The paper doesn't have to be scholarly, complicated, or even very long. It can be as short as one or two pages, or as long as ten pages. It is acceptable to request anonymity.

Winning entries will be selected by a distinguished panel of judges, including WCVB-TV reporter Janet Wu; business executive Thomas Flatley; philanthropist Diana Spencer; Massachusetts Secretary of Environmental Affairs Ellen Roy Herzfelder; and Thomas McDermott, former partner at Ernst and Young.

Please submit your ideas to us either via e-mail at [bgc@pioneerinstitute.org](mailto:bgc@pioneerinstitute.org), or via the mail at 85 Devonshire St., 8th Floor; Boston, Mass. 02109.

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