

[Editorial: County needs solution to unincorporated areas](#)

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The little pockets of unincorporated areas that dot Cook County add up to a big problem.

Because those areas are not a part of any municipality, they rely on the county for police protection, building and zoning oversight, animal control and other services. But because those areas are numerous, mostly small and scattered like lint on a blanket, it costs more to service them than it would for a similar number of people in a single community.

County Board President Toni Preckwinkle wants the county to get out of the business of servicing the 51 square miles of unincorporated areas, which are home to 109,000 people — about 2.1 percent of the county's population. It's a laudable goal, but it won't be easy. It'll take an intergovernmental deal that creates savings not just for the county, but also for the many suburbs that would be expected to absorb or take over servicing these unincorporated areas.

Here's how we got into this mess: As once-tiny suburban communities grew, their planners boosted their bottom lines by annexing tax-generating properties — shopping centers, auto dealerships, industrial parks, etc. Areas with high-density housing and no businesses — long seen as tax losers — tended to be left out. Because the county building code has not been as strong as those in some municipalities, construction has been of lower quality. And unincorporated areas often lack sewers, curbs and gutters that meet municipal codes.

The county doesn't have tax-increment financing district powers to upgrade these areas. But for a suburban village or city to annex them would in essence be asking their residents to pay higher taxes, which would be a tough sell.

Other areas are not necessarily tax losers, but their residents prefer to remain unincorporated to keep their taxes lower.

Nobody planned it this way. But now Preckwinkle wants to turn over responsibility for these areas to the nearest municipalities. According to the Civic Federation, that could save \$54.7 million a year.

Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin thinks the General Assembly should enact a master plan to eliminate unincorporated parcels. But the county's 128 municipalities won't want them without a share of the savings.

Palos Hills Mayor Gerald Bennett is heading an effort through the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning to lower municipal costs by sharing services. A similar plan might help the county and its taxpayers.

Preckwinkle is right to push for a solution. This problem won't go away on its own.