



## PERSPECTIVE

# The Lure of Government Efficiency

BY KATHERINE BARRETT AND RICHARD GREENE

**N**obody likes raising taxes or cutting services. And so, when a local government tries to balance its budget, a powerful third alternative is improving efficiency. This has been a particularly hot topic over the last months, with proposed cuts in federal spending and the specter of weakening revenues.

Over the years, efforts to make more efficient governments have been built into the job of performance auditors. These efforts are often supported by internal government continuous improvement initiatives and are bolstered by legislative commissions, task forces, or consultant contracts that study and suggest new approaches or

renew past efficiency proposals that faded out years before.

At the state level, new efficiency efforts have been cropping up since January through both gubernatorial action and legislation in the states of Florida, Georgia, Iowa, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, and Texas, with task forces or committees also set up in Kansas, Missouri, and North Carolina. Though these efforts have been less common at the city and county level, interest and action have accelerated.

In March 2025, for example, the consolidated city-county government of Duval County and the City of Jacksonville, Florida, created the Duval-DOGE [Department of Government Efficiency] through the city council.

Finance Chair Ron Salem was motivated by the city Finance Department's projections of budgetary imbalance. "We are looking at \$70 to \$100 million deficits over the next two or three years," he said. Budget difficulties stemmed in part from significant salary increases for public safety employees and would be exacerbated by the reinstatement of public safety pensions that had been eliminated for new city hires in 2017, but were brought back in 2024 due to difficulties in recruiting first responders.

Initially, Salem asked the council's auditors whether an outside individual should be hired to take on the effort, but they decided that they could help identify productive areas to examine themselves and that external help was not necessary.

A fundamental difference between Duval-DOGE and the Department of Government Efficiency at the federal level is that there was no plan to cut employee positions or departments, according to Salem. "We have a much more targeted, specific approach."

So far, the most productive line of inquiry for Duval-DOGE has focused on the capital plan, where auditors found about \$8.4 million in unused dollars remaining in the accounts of projects that had already been completed. An examination of dormant projects that had been approved but never started or were completed years ago also yielded about \$11.3 million, once it was determined that they were no longer needed. There was also more than \$5.5 million in available "Fair Share" dollars, which come from fees paid by local developers to help fund capital projects.

Other items involved those that should be considered in future budgets, such as the potential impact of current library usage on the replacement and opening of library branches.

In a situation symptomatic of the intense partisan divide throughout the country, the predominantly Republican city council's Duval-DOGE effort is running simultaneously with a continuous improvement initiative undertaken by the city's Democratic administration. Mayor Donna Deagan's 904 LEAN initiative, which began in

---

“When our people are spending less time on paperwork and administrative duties, that gives them more time to fix a pothole; to help deliver meals to the food insecure; to help a business owner get their permit faster; and to save lives at the Fire Department.”

—DONNA DEEGAN, MAYOR OF JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA

---

2024, has trained employees to utilize Lean Six Sigma methods to streamline the processes that develop over time to run city services.

The city's Lean Six Sigma effort has been aided by the Jacksonville Lean Consortium, which has been working to revitalize private-sector continuous improvement efforts within the community.

A few days after Duval-DOGE was announced in March, Deagan held a press conference to provide updates on her streamlining efforts, which she said had saved employees 106,000 hours of work time. By mid-June, the number of hours saved had grown to 275,000, according to the mayor's transparency dashboard.

“When our people are spending less time on paperwork and administrative duties, that gives them more time to fix a pothole; to help deliver meals to the food insecure; to help a business owner get their permit faster; and to save lives at the Fire Department,” she said.

Of course, efficiency efforts may have a boomerang effect if the dollars saved result in inferior services. James Bussell, director of the consortium, says that since cities are often short of resources and sufficient staffing, “it's important to make sure the money is being spent in the best way. That's why we focus a lot on effectiveness, which is efficiency with the quality aspect included.”

All efficiency efforts face obstacles. Over the years, many consultant reports focused on efficiency end up on the shelf with only a few ideas implemented and many other suggestions forgotten. Commissions and task forces are also mostly time-limited, with leadership

changes and external events cutting into the actual implementation of ideas.

Lean Six Sigma and similar continuous improvement methods also have sustainability issues. Continuous improvement orientation can take time, with the need for employee training to teach methods and careful communication to reduce employees' fears that by streamlining processes, they may reduce the need for their jobs.

“In order to get Lean to work, you need to rally and galvanize the people who do the work,” said Bussell, who will not engage with a project, whether public- or private-sector, that is set on using continuous improvement methods to reduce the employee count.

While getting established takes time, entities that embed “continuous improvement” in their culture often show dramatic effects. Historically, these initiatives have been used by administrations led by both major political parties, with Lean methods in the private sector also adopted across political lines.

Take the City of Goodyear, Arizona, a very fast-growing community that has been using Lean and related methods for about ten years. Development Services Director Katie Wilken offers an example that shows how efficiency efforts can help increase revenues, as well as cut into expenses.

As she describes it, the city was intent on shrinking the 22 weeks it took for new drive-in fast-food restaurants to get permits. By bringing a group of employees from multiple departments into one room for a full week to map out, study, and figure out solutions, the city was able to cut six weeks off the permitting process—a meaningful change since

“every [additional] week of our development review process cost \$2,000,” in revenue, Wilken said.

Some of the solutions the employees came up with sound simple in retrospect, but it took a concentrated joint exercise to find them and to come up with solutions that were amenable to different departments that ordinarily would have been making decisions separately. One change shifted the scheduled meeting time for the planning commission so it would align with council meetings. Another focused on adjustments to due dates in the city clerk's office for materials that were needed in the permit process.

Earlier in the life of the city's Lean Six Sigma approach, departments were more likely to resist the loss of an employee's work time for a week. However, with the city able to relay stories of successful streamlining, those objections have become less frequent. “I think it's imperative to figure out how to tell stories that show how we're making improvements by engaging employees and how it's making a difference to the bottom line, whether it's on the revenue side or the cost-saving side,” she said. ■



**Katherine Barrett and Richard Greene** are principals of Barrett and Greene, Inc.