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Public policy requires time, talent, treasure

The General Assembly is Indiana's engine of representative democracy. It is where the processes for choosing policies, setting priorities and reaching agreement between conflicting values and interests occur. Regrettably, in Indiana these conflicts occur in short bursts and almost always without the benefit of nonpartisan research on public policy or effective unbiased auditing of the benefits of legislation.

In 2002, our 150 lawmakers passed landmark legislation affecting the economy. Unfortunately, these improvements in the inventory, gross-receipts and research-and-development taxes were acted upon in four months. Special-interest groups made their appeals, often conflicting. Legislators were required to interpret the information from these organizations and understand the unique needs of their constituencies while maintaining their (non-legislative) careers and caring for their families.

Our state faces great challenges. However, if we expect our engine of democracy to run efficiently, we must be willing to provide the General Assembly with the resources to discern the potential benefits of public policy in a society of rapid technological



VIEWPOINT

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advancement and extremely mobile intellectual and financial capital.

Taxpayers must question whether a part-time Legislature is adequate today. In 1971, the Indiana General Assembly began meeting annually. The growing frequency of special sessions and the politicization of the legislative process have diminished civility and made consensus-building difficult. Further, legislators' gender, ethnicity and full-time occupations don't reflect the population at large.

Are the General Assembly's low salaries resulting in a body composed disproportionately of the elderly, who are retired; the wealthy, who need not be concerned about the level of compensation; and the young and inexperienced, for whom a legislative salary may be competitive with what they could earn elsewhere? Do time demands make legislative service impossible for people in professions other than education or law?

Further, assisting these part-time legislators are 82 members of the Legislative Services Agency (LSA.) They draft and prepare amendments for each bill, which can vary from 1,000 bills and 5,000 amendments in a short session to nearly 3,000 bills and 20,000 amendments in a long one. LSA staff also prepare a fiscal analysis for each bill. They must be able to dissect a \$20 billion state budget and understand the

operating issues and policies of all state agencies, the complexity of Medicaid reimbursement and the merits of the 21st Century Research and Technology Fund. Finally, LSA supports the Legislature's nearly 50 permanent committees as well as interim committees, which numbered 42 this year.

In the midst of all this, critically important public-policy research is expected to take place, but rarely does. No system is in place to identify worthy trends, illuminate deficiencies or expand upon successes. Legislation is rarely analyzed after enactment to determine its impact.

We rightly expect our government to further policies that enable successive generations to realize greater socio-economic advancements. However, the contemporary environment of anti-politics, anti-politician, anti-process and anti-institution is hard on legislatures. We must remind ourselves about the importance and workings of our Legislature in a representative democracy. We must build public support for the Legislature as an institution and representative democracy as a system. And we must be willing to invest in the resources necessary to realize the benefits of a smoothly running public-policy engine, whether that be a full-time Legislature or a more robust LSA. •

Williams is a member of IBJ's Corporate Opinion Board.