



Navigating the New Intergovernmental Relationship

Geoffrey Beckwith | Former Executive Director & CEO, Massachusetts Municipal Association

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KEY POINTS

- **Federal power** has shifted to one-way executive control, with fewer resources for states and cities.
- **Programs and local authority** are shrinking, and checks and balances are weaker.
- **Local leaders** still have tools that make a difference. They should focus on mission, coalitions, communication, and planning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE & LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS

Examples

- States and municipalities have control over education, but cannot implement DEI or teach certain curricula
- States and municipalities must cooperate with ICE on immigration or face penalties
- States have greater leeway on environmental regulations, but cannot exceed fed rules
- Decreased/eliminated funding for Medicaid, housing, transit, public health, disasters, green energy and climate mitigation, arts and culture, and more

When the federal government shifts gears, cities and states often must struggle to keep up. That is the theme of a recent ASPA webinar hosted by **Stephanie Bentadun**, Associate Director of the National Center for Public Performance, where longtime Massachusetts Municipal Association CEO **Geoff Beckwith** breaks down what's happening in Washington DC, and why it matters for communities on the ground.

"Federalism has changed dramatically in just a few years," Beckwith said. "And if you're in public service, you're the one who has to figure out how to make it work for your community."

From Cooperation to One-Way Federalism

Beckwith began with some history. For most of the 20th century, he explained, we lived under "Cooperative Federalism." That meant the federal government partnered with states and cities to design and implement programs, even if there were plenty of fights over money and authority. Organizations like the National Governors Association and National League of Cities were born out of this era.

But in 2016, the first Trump administration introduced a different approach, which Beckwith calls "One-Way Federalism." Instead of dialogue, the model relied on unilateral executive actions. States were left scrambling; for example, competing against each other for Personal Protective Equipment during COVID-19. "It wasn't so much devolving power as it was pushing responsibilities down without resources," Beckwith noted.

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The Biden years restored cooperation, with big investments like the American Rescue Plan Act and the infrastructure law. But, as Beckwith pointed out, "January 20, 2025, changed everything again." With the second Trump administration came a sharper version of One-Way Federalism, this time backed by Project 2025 and the theory of "Unitary Executive Authority," which seeks to give the president far more control over federal agencies while shrinking the role of career civil servants.

"It's not just centralization," Beckwith warned. "It's a direct challenge to the modern state: the idea that government should be professional, ethical and guided by evidence."

What It Means for State and Local Governments

So, what does this look like in practice? Federal funding for Medicaid, housing, and climate programs is being cut. Local control is shrinking on issues like diversity initiatives and environmental standards. "States may get more autonomy in some areas," Beckwith explained, "but only if they align with the federal agenda. That's less 'partnership' and more 'punishment'."

Congress, meanwhile, has been "on the sidelines," and while courts have issued injunctions against some executive actions, enforcement remains murky. Universities, nonprofits and even law firms have faced pressure. Corporate-level media has also been targeted by the administration. "The checks and balances we've relied on are being tested in new ways," Beckwith observed.

Practical Advice for Public Administrators

Rather than despair, Beckwith urged practitioners to stay focused on their mission and use what leverage they have. His advice boiled down to four themes:

1. **Restrain the rhetoric.** "Don't get drawn into partisan language. Talk about what policies mean for local families and neighborhoods."
2. **Build coalitions.** Work with state leagues, national organizations and neighboring communities. "There's strength in numbers."
3. **Focus on trust.** Surveys consistently show people trust local government more than Washington. "That's because we're closer to them. We need to tell our story better."

4. **Plan ahead.** Expect cuts. Diversify funding, draft legal protections and strengthen state-local partnerships.

Beckwith also emphasized practicing communication. "Don't just throw out statistics," he said. "Tell stories people can relate to: 'brown water in your taps' is more powerful than 'cities and towns maintain eight million miles of pipe'."



Looking Ahead

Beckwith was blunt: "One-Way Federalism is here until at least 2029. The modern state is under attack." But, he also stressed that state and local leaders still have agency. They can work across partisan lines, protect their communities and inspire the next generation of public servants.

Webinar moderator Sonia Alleyne, Assistant Chair and Executive in Residence in the Suffolk University Sawyer Business School's Department of Public Service and Healthcare Administration, closed with a reminder from former House Speaker Tip O'Neill: "All politics is local." No matter what happens in Washington, the needs of residents don't disappear. And that, Beckwith argued, is where state and local government can shine.

"Remember," he concluded, "things are rarely as bad—or as good—as they seem. If we act with principled pragmatism, we can still make a difference."

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