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Senate OKs inventory bill



Jeff DeMoss - STANDARD-EXAMINER

The Senate passed a bill Tuesday requiring local governments in Utah to take stock of all the services and facilities they provide that could otherwise be handled by the private sector.

Senate Bill 45, sponsored by Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, mandates that municipalities conduct an inventory every two years that separates "core governmental" functions from "competitive" functions, where private companies are providing the same or similar services.

Cities will be allowed to make their own judgment calls about what to put on the list, and whether to make any changes, Stephenson said.

"The intent is to create a minimal burden on cities, and at the same time, have them be cognizant of the areas where they are competing with the private sector," he said. "What they do with the information is up to them."

The bill doesn't require cities to make changes, but it still sparked a lively debate about the level of detail that would be required of cities.

Sen. Jon Greiner, R-Ogden, who is also the Ogden police chief, is concerned the bill is pushing an unfunded mandate on municipalities.

"If we have to inventory every room and piece of ground the city owns, if we go down that far, there is a cost," Greiner said.

Sen. Karen Mayne, D-West Valley City, said nearly everything could conceivably be privatized, but many functions are better kept under the "even eye" of government.

"Think of a library, for example," Mayne said.

"There's probably a company that could run it cheaper than the government, but then we get into issues like the CEO's wife doesn't like red books, so the library will have no red books."

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Stephenson said decisions about whether to keep something under government or privatize it will remain fully in the hands of local officials, and by extension, the voters who elect them.

He modified the bill to include only the most populous counties and largest cities in the state, which he said have sophisticated accounting and inventory systems already in place.

Sen. Peter Knudson, R-Brigham City, said periodic inventories are very helpful for businesses, and governments could see similar benefits.

"As our cities grow, we are faced with the question of 'what do we have?,' " Knudson said. "This gives us a chance to take a pause and look at what we're doing."

The Senate sent Stephenson's bill to the House on a 19-9 vote.

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