

**Armstrong County Study Commission**  
by  
**Raymond E. Muth**

*Valley News Dispatch 12/22/96 - Community Columnist*

Ironically, the Armstrong County government study commission was elected to combat an evil that exists at the state level, not the county level. The issue that got them elected was the inequities of property taxation. But there is nothing the commission can do about property taxes. Furthermore, there is no way to make a rotten system of taxation fair. Reassessment shuffled the burdensome deck, opening up a hornet's nest of dissent. Anger never should have been channeled toward the commissioners. They had the courage to do their job. Instead outrage should have been aimed directly at Harrisburg.

As we have learned, school property taxes are nothing more than a diabolical disguise to keep the affluent better educated than those in poor and rural areas. Reality is that many school districts can never adequately fund schools no matter what the form of district taxation.

Over the years, Harrisburg has managed to squelch the cries of 217 school districts who have filed suit against the state by giving subsidies to those they deemed inadequate. But the disparity grew too large. The problem became far too visible. Regular folks began to awaken to the reality of this injustice.

No one is begrudging a group of affluent people that want to spend more for education. That however should be the definition of private education. If Governor Ridge really wanted to get the school voucher system passed, he should have pushed legislation enacting the state to collect all school tax revenues and then had these funds proportionally disbursed among all school districts. He would now be filling private schools and promoting real competition. Instead we are strapped with an unjust system until equity is achieved.

So if the Armstrong County government commission group can do nothing about property taxes, what can they accomplish? The chief role of county government is to carry out state mandates. Its hard work. The Armstrong County Commissioners do a great job within the existing framework. That should be the first thing acknowledged by the commission. But is it possible that more can be efficiently accomplished through another structure? Should voters be given the opportunity to decide?

The squabble between the commissioners and the commission about money spent for a new study is going to wear thin with the electorate soon. The government study commission is going to lose the credibility battle because they will appear to be another group out for themselves if this continues to be an issue.

Meanwhile, the Allegheny County Commissioners have done an about-face and seem poised to adopt many components of Compac 21. Among other things, they are advocating the elimination of many offices including their own jobs. Capture the moment. Its a phenomenon that will not reappear for 1,000 years.

I would suggest that not one penny of taxpayer money be spent on yet another government study. The government study commission's only viable option is to submit Allegheny County's Compac 21, period. Anything else is dead on arrival if it even arrives.

A great deal of time and money was spent on the Compac 21 study. Its well done and its easy to obtain for \$20 from the Pennsylvania Economy League. The general public is likely to be too busy to take time to read any of it. However there is enough there that can be conveyed to the public and understood simply. Compac 21 has real credibility in Western Pennsylvania. Voters can understand that if it has support in Allegheny County, if nothing else, it at least has to be something worth considering. If the government study commission embraces Compac 21, they can save everyone's money and submit an ingenious plan which was directed by Dr. Murray of Duquesne University.

Regardless of the outcome of this battle, what precipitated the unrest in Armstrong County was property taxes. What's needed from the commission is strong leadership that effectively articulates what the real issues are and empowers voters to seek justice at the state level while giving them a choice on the county level to improve efficiency.



[E-Mail Ray](#)

[Home](#) | [About Me](#) | [Family](#) | [Critters](#) | [Work](#) | [Articles](#) | [Archives](#)