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MICROCOMPUTERS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT:  
A PROGRAM FOR SMALL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

by

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For the first time since the Great Depression, local governments throughout the United States have begun to experience severe revenue-expenditure imbalances. Inflation, rising expectations, and citizen demands for services have produced governmental intervention into heretofore untouched areas. Combined with the generally decreasing rate of local revenue growth and with reductions in federal and state aid, this has produced serious fiscal problems for many local governments. With resources no longer available to provide prior levels of public services, many local governments have had to cut back on their activities.

In order to function more effectively in a period of "cutback management," local governments must seek improved and more cost-effective methods of performing their functions. Computer technology is one promising means of improving management methods and possibly reducing costs as well.

Recent innovations in computer technology have substantially improved the performance and reliability of electronic computers and have produced significant reductions in their size, cost, and user complexity. These changes have for the first time brought computers within the financial and administrative grasp of small and rural local governments in the United States.

Since their commercial introduction in 1977, more microcomputers have been sold than all other types of computers in the history of electronic computing. Furthermore, predictions are for skyrocketing sales of micros in the next few years. For example, an article in the July 26, 1982 Computerworld projected sales of desktop computers of \$9 billion by 1985, up from \$1 billion in 1980.

Local government in the U.S. has a mixed history of computer use. Available data suggest a direct relationship between city or county size (population) and computer use. The larger the community the more likely it is to use computers and the more likely it is to use computer technology more extensively and to have more sophisticated applications. Conversely, the smaller the community the less likely it is to use computers or data processing. By the mid-1970's, for example, one survey found that more than 90% of cities over 50,000 and counties over 100,000 used computers in one way or another (Kling and Danziger, 1982). The same study, however, noted that less than 50% of cities under 10,000 use computers. Since then, especially with the widespread availability of minicomputers, "packaged" systems and micros, computer use by all categories of local government has probably grown. For several reasons, however, smaller local governments can be expected to lag behind in computer adoptions. These reasons include size, number and relative sophistication of governmental applications, relative absence of professional managerial personnel, and, until the advent of the microcomputer, cost.

For current purposes, smaller local governments are defined as cities under 50,000 and counties under 100,000 in non-metropolitan areas. (Over 6,300 or nearly 94% of all cities in the United States have fewer than 50,000 persons. For counties the number under 100,000 is 2,697 or nearly 89%.) Because of their smaller population these governments perform fewer activities and operate under fewer pressures than their more urbanized counterparts. Hence, the need for computers and data processing is not as great. Smaller and more rural local governments also operate with fewer professional managerial personnel. This means that less knowledge and expertise is available in these governments to make decisions about computer use.

Recognizing the relative disadvantaged position of small local governments in relation to computer technology and also the probable impact of growing microcomputer sales on these governments, the Center for Applied Urban Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha developed a program to assist them become "smart consumers" of microcomputer technology. The program, funded by the W.K. Kellogg foundation of Battle Creek, Michigan, will run for two years. Its intent is to develop prototype training and technical assistance materials to assist small and rural local governments effectively to acquire and utilize microcomputers. These materials will include training programs in microcomputers and local government suitable for local government personnel and officials, instructor and participant handbooks to accompany the training programs, a film and video tape presentation on microcomputers and local government, demonstration projects in

microcomputer acquisition and use in rural local governments in Nebraska, and standard documents needed for microcomputer system procurement.

At this writing, faculty at the center are initiating a survey among local governments in Nebraska and surrounding states regarding existing computer use and future computer needs. This survey, combined with other data, will help the Center design the most appropriate training materials in microcomputer technology and use for small local governments.

The transferability of the training programs and technical assistance materials is an important feature of this project. All materials will be packaged so that they can be used by local governments and by technical assistance providers, such as university technical assistance or extension personnel, in Nebraska and other states. In addition, advisory committees made up of Nebraska local government officials, university technical assistance and extension specialists, and representatives of several national level public interest groups (ICMA, NLC, NACO, NATaT, PTI) have been established to provide guidance for the project. These committees will ensure the broadest possible applicability of the programs and materials developed in this project. Further, committee members will also be among the first local government personnel and technical assistance providers to use them.

The Center's efforts under the Kellogg grant over the next two years will make available to small and rural local governments information about microcomputers, and materials and methods that

will promote better understanding of the technology and its application to local government functions. With help from this project, small and rural local governments should be able to acquire and use microcomputer technology more cost-effectively in an era of cutback management.