

The \$100,000 Hyphen: 5 Lessons from Local Government

Washington Should Steal

Introduction: Beyond the Headlines

It's easy to believe that government is a synonym for gridlock. The daily headlines are filled with stories of partisan standoffs, government shutdowns, and wasteful spending, leaving many with the impression that progress is impossible.

But away from the national spotlight, real progress often happens quietly. At the local and state levels, practical leaders are finding pragmatic, effective, and sometimes surprisingly simple solutions to long-standing problems. These aren't stories that generate clickbait, but they are stories of how government is supposed to work. In a recent interview, State Representative Jonathan Zlotnik of Massachusetts shared several of these impactful, behind-the-scenes accounts of effective governance. Here are the top five takeaways.

1. The \$100,000 Hyphen: How a Tiny Edit Fixed a Decades-Old Problem

For years, the Gardner District Court and the Winchendon District Court operated as two separate entities, despite being housed in the same building and sharing the same staff. The Winchendon court building had been closed decades ago during a budget crunch, but its operations were moved—not merged—into the Gardner courthouse. This "bureaucratic hangover" created redundant systems that served no practical purpose.

The solution was a simple legislative fix proposed by Rep. Zlotnik through an amendment to the state budget: formally merge the two courts into a single "Gardner-Winchendon District Court." This administrative change, which required no alteration to day-to-day operations or personnel, immediately saved taxpayers over \$100,000 a year.

This story is a prime example of finding and eliminating "wasteful spending," which, as Zlotnik notes, never appears as a line item in a budget. It highlights the critical need for deep institutional knowledge to find efficiencies that don't cause "collateral damage." Zlotnik is quick to share credit, noting the idea was first brought to him by court staff—the people with the boots-on-the-ground experience to spot an invisible problem.

Interviewer: "You have taken a dash and put it in between Gardner and [Winchendon] calling it the Gardner-Winchendon District Court and by the simple insertion of a dash you have saved the taxpayers \$100,000. Is that correct?" **Rep. Zlotnik:** "Uh essentially that is what we did."

2. Fixing Leaks from the Ulysses S. Grant Administration

For small towns, the critical issue of aging water and sewer infrastructure often remains invisible until it becomes catastrophic. This reality was brought into sharp focus when a significant break in a local water system wasted an enormous amount of water.

The culprit was a piece of infrastructure—a valve—that failed catastrophically. The astonishing detail that drove home the urgency of the problem was that the broken part was installed when "Ulysses S. Grant was president."

This single failure became a powerful catalyst for action. It highlighted the urgent need for investment, helping to secure over \$10 million in state and federal grant money for infrastructure replacement in the towns of Gardner, Winchendon, and Ashburnham. By leveraging these grants, local leaders ensured that the heavy financial burden of these essential upgrades did not fall solely on local ratepayers and taxpayers. "...that piece that that hunk of metal uh was put in the ground when Ulysses S. Grant was president and you know that that's well well past the warranty. um but really kind of brought it home for us why this needs to be prioritized..."

3. The Politics of Potholes: A Quiet Compromise that Benefits Rural Roads

For years, state road funding formulas have been a point of contention, often disadvantaging rural communities. The old formula in Massachusetts, based on a combination of population density, road miles, and local jobs, naturally sent a larger portion of funds to more crowded urban and suburban areas. The 2025 breakthrough was not a fight, but a compromise. Instead of trying to re-slice the existing \$200 million program, leaders created a new, additional fund of a "couple hundred million." Critically, this new fund uses a different formula—one that "generously benefits road miles." This clever solution directs more money to less dense communities with many miles of road to maintain, but it does so without taking away from urban centers.

This success was made possible by a combination of factors, including a new transportation committee chair from a rural area and new revenue streams from the state's "millionaires tax" earmarked for transportation. It stands as a powerful lesson in pragmatic coalition-building and finding win-win solutions instead of engaging in zero-sum battles.

4. Giving Old Schools New Purpose

As Rep. Zlotnik articulated, repurposing old, beloved school buildings is essential to maintaining a community's vibrancy. Instead of letting these landmarks fall into disuse, a strategic approach can transform them into vital community assets.

The prime example is the "Winchendon project," where two former school buildings are being redeveloped into 44 units of permanent supportive housing for veterans. With the state funding approximately 90% of the cost, it represents one of the largest state investments in the region and one of the first major housing construction projects in the area in at least 20 years. In a detail that feels like poetry, the new homes are located right next to the town's senior center and, as Zlotnik notes, "very fittingly, Grand Army of the

Republic Park," a space named for the veterans of the Civil War. It's a story of a community honoring its service members, full circle, across generations.

This is not an isolated success. It is part of a repeatable, strategic approach to community development, with other school redevelopment projects in the pipeline to create housing and community centers in the nearby towns of Templeton and Gardner. It shows a clear vision for turning nostalgic liabilities into tangible, forward-looking assets.

5. The Unseen Consensus: How to Pass a Budget Without Shutting Down

While the federal government lurches from one shutdown threat to the next, the Massachusetts state legislature offers a starkly different model of governance.

The surprising fact is this: in Rep. Zlotnik's 14 years in the House, he has participated in 13 annual budget debates. Of those 13 massive, complex spending plans, only *one* passed on a strict party-line vote. Every other budget was approved with near-unanimous, bipartisan support. But the most powerful part of this story isn't just that they cooperate; it's *why*. Legislative Democrats hold a supermajority and could, Zlotnik points out, pass the budget every year without a single Republican vote. The key is that they *choose* not to. This remarkable record is not due to a lack of disagreement, but to a shared, foundational commitment to consensus-building and keeping the government running. Even when the final budget is late, temporary one-month budgets are passed unanimously. It's a process built on the assumption that the goal is not to win, but to govern.

"I think it shows our commitment to consensus building, uh, to reaching across the aisle, you know, to making compromise... I think it's something that our federal uh partners uh could take a lesson from..."

Conclusion: Finding Progress in the Details

These stories paint a clear picture: effective governance is often found in the details. It's in the small administrative fixes that save a surprising amount of money, in the smart funding formulas that build consensus instead of division, and in a steadfast, bipartisan commitment to getting the job done.

These stories remind us that progress isn't always loud. It makes you wonder: what other complex problems have simple, overlooked solutions hiding in plain sight?