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Tight times demand tight management — and innovation

It has long been hip to trash the workings of government, which is an interesting thing in a country that worships democracy. People like Dan McElroy are at the front lines of the battle to make the wheels turn more smoothly.

We're glad he's there.

McElroy is a former business owner, Burnsville mayor, Republican state legislator, state finance commissioner and chief of staff under Gov. Tim Pawlenty. He now is Pawlenty's senior advisor on innovation. Once at the vortex of crisis management, McElroy is now preaching the doctrine of efficient government to all who will listen.

He dropped by the other day with a listing of reorganizations, collaborations, management decisions and technological changes the Pawlenty team is proud of. These are not things that appear in headlines. But they have value. They can chip away at our ingrained dislike of the government our democracy has spawned — by chipping away at things to dislike.

The overall goal, McElroy said, has been to move people and money from the "back office" of government, where the necessary work of the bureaucracy is done, to the "front office" of providing direct services. It's the governmental equivalent of a police department getting officers out of desks and onto the street.

All governors have made a run at efficiency, as they should. We just happen to have a remarkably gifted person responsible for Pawlenty's attempt.

McElroy is a wonk's wonk. If you mention a policy or a program, chances are he knows how it works, in as much detail as you desire. He probably knows how many FTEs (full-time equivalents) the program has now and what its numbers were in the last three budget cycles. And he's a cheerful and humble fellow, once a rotund "Big Mac" and now a slimmed-down mini-Mac.

In an age when big tax hikes are off the table and economic growth cannot solve all our problems, McElroy's quest is a critical one. He calculates that \$170 million to \$200 million has been moved into higher-priority functions or saved by these types of internal improvements.

"This is \$200 million that we didn't have to raise taxes for," McElroy said.

Employment in the core executive branch, excluding higher education, is down from about 32,800 to 31,600 under Pawlenty, McElroy said. Overtime costs are down. Space in state buildings is opening up — allowing agencies paying rent elsewhere to claim it — due to digital imaging of paper records and other improvements. McElroy is holding listening sessions to stimulate discussion within agencies and is the one-person sales force of better ways of doing old jobs.

Government, unlike private business, has no direct competition to drive it to improve and change. That may be one reason we capitalists resent it. But we can't live well without some of it. And we want it to work better.

State workers and citizens are encouraged to contact the state's Drive to Excellence with suggestions for how things could work better in state government. The e-mail address is: excellence@state.mn.us. The Web site is www.excellence.state.mn.us.