No state has eliminated its lieutenant governorship since Florida in 1885, but Illinois flirted with the idea earlier this year. A proposed constitutional amendment that would have axed the office and handed next-in-line succession to the state’s attorney general cleared the House, but was shunted aside in the Senate.

As HJRCA 5 made its way through the General Assembly, proponents cited the savings as part of their pitch — an estimated $1.6 million a year. The measure won easy passage in the House (95-10), but that question of succession never could get resolved. Some senators, for example, instead preferred a plan that would tap the next constitutional officeholder of the governor’s political party.

Either of Illinois’ proposed succession plans would have been unique in U.S. state government. Right now, in 45 of the 50 states (including all in the Midwest), the lieutenant governor is next in line. The remaining five states make either the secretary of state or senate president the next in line. New Jersey is the most recent state to create a lieutenant governorship as part of a succession plan, having done so via a 2005 voter-approved constitutional amendment. (The lieutenant governor also serves in the governor’s cabinet as secretary of state.)

State officials have realized that clearer lines of succession — and definitions of when a governor is “disabled” — are needed because there really could be mass casualty or epidemic events, says Julia Hurst, executive director of the National Lieutenant Governors Association.

For example, she says, if your governor is overseas when a disaster strikes, can he or she govern at that moment? Can someone recovering from a coma govern? “This is post-9/11. People really started looking at their successions in a different light,” Hurst adds.

Aside from their “just in case” function, the power and authority that states give their lieutenant governors vary as widely as the states’ shapes. Indiana, for instance, vests its lieutenant governor with constitutional authority as Senate president, who can introduce bills and participate in debates as well as vote to break ties. The office also has statutory authority as head of the Agricultural Commission and as chair of offices on rural affairs, energy, tourism and housing. In addition, Indiana’s lieutenant governor appoints members to various councils and commissions, and is a participating member of five other state boards.

Then there is Illinois’ love-hate relationship with the lieutenant governorship.

Dave O’Neal, a lieutenant governor under Gov. Jim Thompson, quit in 1981, citing boredom. And Bob Kustra, who became lieutenant governor on a ticket with Gov. Jim Edgar, almost quit in 1994 to become a radio talk show host. He reneged after Edgar underwent emergency heart surgery, but did resign four years later to become a university president.

Yet Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn stepped seamlessly into the governorship on Jan. 29, 2009, upon then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s unanimous conviction by the state Senate (following impeachment by the House). Illinois’ lieutenant governor also once served as Senate president, but these powers were stripped with the writing of a new Constitution in 1970. Today, the person holding this office serves as chair of the Governor’s Rural Affairs Council, the Illinois River Coordinating Council and the Rural Bond Bank of Illinois, while also leading the state’s Main Street Program.
Since 1973, resolutions to abolish the office by constitutional amendment have been offered seven times. People look at the lieutenant governor’s office as “not needed until it is,” and at its abolishment as a way to save money, says Charles N. Wheeler III, director of the public affairs reporting program at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

“It’s always been a topic of conversation, but it’s never been one where people would go to the wall to get it,” says Wheeler, who covered Illinois’ 1970 Constitutional Convention as a reporter. “The office is still there; it’s probably not going to go away. It’s going to be whatever the occupant makes of it.”

As for Florida? The lieutenant governorship was resurrected in the state’s 1968 Constitution.

*Capital Closeup* is a regular series of articles produced by CSG Midwest that highlights institutional issues in state governments.

By:
Wednesday, June 29, 2016 at 01:01 PM

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