
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”
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Education and research in relation to agriculture, forest preserve and cost of local government, at Farm and Home Week, Ithaca, New York, February 19, 1932

I am always particularly happy to find time and an occasion to speak in the halls of Cornell University, for it is an institution which belongs to all the people of the State of New York; I take pride in its record of magnificent service to the State and its people. From its earliest days, under the principles laid down by its founder it has shown a continuous, sympathetic and soundly practical interest in the welfare of all the men and women who have been working with hand and brain to develop the State and to earn their livelihood in it.

I am always glad, too, to greet a body of farmers here because I regard this as an especially appropriate place for them to meet. During its long life Cornell University has been working to shed light on their problems, to contribute to their comfort and by every way possible to make them the most advanced and intelligent and capable body of husbandmen in the entire world. Those efforts have produced splendid results to which the progress of our agriculture testifies. They have helped to enable the State to maintain its rank as one of the great agricultural states of the Union, side by side with its progress in industry, commerce and finance. Early in the present century the ties which link the farmer to this university were made much closer by the establishment here of the State College of Agriculture, while the State's participation in the selection of the board of trustees of the university has made it in fact essentially an institution in partnership with the State itself.

It is well that farmers should come here as often as possible for their meetings so that they may realize by continuing contact the work that is being done here for them and may find means to avail themselves to an ever-increasing degree of the store of knowledge and advice that can be had here. The university and the college, too, need their advice and need to be brought continually into contact with their practical experience on the soil and to learn of the difficulties and problems they encounter. The State College of Agriculture and the university have done much to make agricultural education and research achievements of which we can all be proud. They have, with your help, raised agriculture to the dignity it deserves—the dignity of a true profession. It has always had and will always have the dignity of being of all occupations the most essential to humanity.

I can think of no more apt illustration of the value of the extra service—aside from purely educational work in agriculture—that is being done here that the survey which is being carried on with the assistance of appropriations from the State into the uses and usefulness of the soils of the State. This survey has had to take into consideration not merely the right agricultural use for different soils and areas in the State, but has progressed to the point of classifying areas to determine just what they can be used for most profitably. Through this survey we are advancing toward not merely a planned agriculture, but toward a planned distribution of population and industry and toward a more intelligently conceived forestry program. We are advancing, too, toward a planned use of the land for recreation, toward better protection for wild life and toward other uses, not agricultural or industrial, which will make the State a better habitation for its people.

All of us have taken much interest in recent years in our forestry program. Only a few months ago I joined with others in laboring to good effect for the passage of a constitutional amendment which is linked closely with our soil utilization plans. This was the amendment authorizing the enlarged reforestation program which will take many idle acres out of potential competition with the good farms of the State and put them to profitable use in the growing of trees, thus converting what is now a liability into an asset. This amendment was attacked as menacing the integrity of our Forest Preserve. I examined the question carefully and satisfied myself

that this was not true, but that on the contrary the amendment would result in a great increase of our forest assets.

I would never countenance any measure which would in fact menace the Forest Preserve, for I regard it as one of the State's truly invaluable and priceless possessions. I intend to defend it against all forms of threatened encroachment which would mar its character as a great area—more than two million acres—of natural wild forest land. I speak of this because I have lately been considering a proposed amendment to the State Constitution which does in my belief constitute such an encroachment. The proposal of which I speak is the amendment to section 7 of article VII of the Constitution known as the Porter-Brereton Amendment, or the Recreational Amendment. This proposed amendment has been passed by two Legislatures, those of 1930 and 1931, and it will come before you on your ballots this coming fall. I take this occasion to urge you to vote against this amendment. I regard it as unnecessary and potentially dangerous. Briefly summarized, it proposes to permit the Legislature to pass bills authorizing the construction of recreational or amusement projects in the Forest Preserve where fees may be charged and which may be operated by counties and towns.

Now I am assured by Commissioner Morgenthau that it is not necessary to amend the Constitution in order that the Forest Preserve may be used by all the people of the State for recreation. The records of the Conservation Department show that half a million people registered last year at the public campsites maintained by the department in the Forest Preserve and it is certainly true that the number who used the public lands which constitute the Forest Preserve for hiking, for hunting, for fishing and other wholesome health-giving recreational purposes would run into the millions. A distinction must be drawn between such uses which are not inconsistent with maintaining the natural wild beauty of these forested mountain regions, and uses which would turn them into amusement parks such as might with propriety be maintained at the public expense elsewhere, but have no place in a forest preserve. I think we should have a clear policy on this point. I am firm in the belief that the Forest Preserve must be maintained as a forest preserve—in all its inspiring wild character—and must not be whittled away to become a mere setting for rural roadhouses, roller coasters and bob-sled runs.

I take passing note of the fact that this proposed amendment envisions a new way by which localities could spend money on questionable projects—in this case on State-owned land. I scarcely need to remind you that I am not just now enthusiastic about any new projects for local expenditure. I spoke on that general subject by radio only a few days ago and there have been reverberations from that talk which have convinced me that it is at least a subject of the greatest possible interest. Some public officials have angrily denounced me for the charges I made in that address, but I have had hundred of letters testifying to the growing anxiety of the public at the mounting load of expenditures for local governmental purposes and the need for finding a remedy.

Many of you may recall the essential points I brought out in that address. I said that the State in 1930 had furnished additional services or money to the counties and localities of the State outside the city of New York amounting in all to more than thirty-one millions of dollars as compared to the year 1928, but that in spite of this the agencies of local government in these 57 counties of the State had not reduced their tax levies in 1930 but instead had increased them over the 1928 figures by thirteen millions of dollars. Now I find I made a mistake in that last figure, due to an error in the records of taxation for the city of Buffalo. The actual increase in these 57 counties for 1930 as compared to 1928 was thirty million dollars instead of thirteen, and there was a gross, over-all increase of the cost of local government in the State outside New York City of approximately sixty-two millions of dollars.

Reprimandations and attempts to shift the blame cannot explain away that fact and no amount of explanation is of any avail to the taxpayer

who has to foot the bill. It seems to me rather silly to say that the State does not support the counties or localities, but that the localities support the State through their contributions in various forms of taxation. We all know that the State does not pluck money from the air, but that its revenue, like that of the localities, is derived from various forms of taxation, mainly borne by the people of the State. The question raised is that of responsibility for the expenditures which cause the increasing burden upon property and it is the localities which are making these expenditures which burden the property owner. Your real property taxes go to the support of local government and I submit and insist that we must find some way to reduce them. I am firmly convinced that much of the expenditure represented in this taxation on real estate is being foolishly and wastefully made. I repeat that the record of increase is shameful.

I called the roll of counties which had failed to pass on to their taxpayers any part of the increased contributions from the State, but instead had absorbed all of the State help and increased taxation besides. I had not the time then and I have not the time today to analyze the increases chargeable to the different units of government within these counties. That is a point on which you who have increased taxes to pay should make your own inquiries and demand explanations from the officials who have control over your local expenditures, whether for county, for town, for highway, for school or for special district purposes. I urge you to form local organizations which will inquire into these things and fix the responsibility directly on the individuals on whom it belongs. It may be that if you are honest with yourselves you will assume your own share of the blame for increased costs of local government, that you will ask yourselves whether the things you have been getting have been worth the price you paid and whether you have been getting your money's worth. It may be that the thought will occur to many of you that you are supporting too many local officials of government, who hinder rather than help you in getting value received for your tax dollar. But at any rate I urge your attention to the fact that you have a more direct and intimate control over your strictly local expenditures than over any other money that you pay out in taxes and that you yourselves may wield the most formidable power that can be exercised to keep these expenses down.

You may well look with suspicion on the explanations of any county or local official who seeks merely to disclaim his own responsibility and is not willing to offer suggestions as to where savings can be made. You have a right to insist that the problem of increased cost of local government shall not be treated as a mere partisan political question and that something more than buck-passing shall be done about it.

It is thoroughly insincere and untruthful, for instance, to advance the explanation that I have seen advanced that State laws and acts of the State government are to blame for increasing local costs. The exact contrary is the fact, for the State has been constantly increasing the amounts allocated from State sources of revenue for local purposes. New forms of taxes have been levied by the State with the object of relieving the burden on real property and additional amounts of State-collected taxes have been shared to the localities, while the State has taken over road and bridge and crossing expenses aggregating many millions. The result should have been a general decrease in property taxation, but instead taxes have increased in appalling amounts.

One particularly hollow excuse for increased county expenses deserves special mention. This is the claim that the State Old-Age Pension Act has imposed new burdens on the counties. The old-age pension has no bearing on the comparative figures that I have cited for 1928 and 1930, since no tax for that purpose was levied until 1931. But it would have no bearing anyway by reason of the fact that the amount of the expenditure for old-age pensions is strictly within the control of the county authorities themselves. It is the State that is compelled to match the appropriations made by the county with an equal amount and not a case of the county being compelled by the State to appropriate. But what is this old-age pension plan, anyway!

It is simply by which counties may care for indigent old people by direct pension payments instead of by supporting them in poor houses or on county farms. And the State assumes half the cost of doing this, relieving the counties to just that amount of caring for their own aged poor. It is in no sense a burden on the counties and I don't believe that any county official who complains of it would himself seriously suggest that his county give up the benefits of the act to go back to a plan under which the county and the town would bear the whole cost of this form of relief.

It is true, of course, that the Emergency Unemployment Act passed by the special session of last year does call for local appropriations to supplement State funds for the relief of those who in nearly every locality in the State are suffering from the present widespread unemployment situation. Those appropriations and expenditures have nothing to do with the tax levies of 1928 and 1930, which I have cited as showing the continued and alarming increase in the routine cost of carrying on local government. It is particularly important now when we have this emergency to meet that we should do something about reducing the expenses that have nothing to do with the emergency. We should have been better able to meet the emergency if we had given more effective consideration to our excessive load of ordinary expenses sooner.

It is not of very great importance to me if a few local officials seek to make this serious issue a mere matter of recriminations and personalities and efforts to transfer blame. I am not interested in the matter of fixing blame except as a step toward the goal of better and more efficient government. I am seeking by every means in my power to stimulate interest on the part of the citizens of the State in their government so that it may function more efficiently and less wastefully. Our hope of improvement lies in our understanding of conditions and concerted effort to better them.