For the past decade, taxpayers have felt helpless while Congress, along with the host of bureaucrats behind the scenes, spends our tax dollars like drunken sailors. Well, we may not be able to effect the change we desire at the federal level, but we absolutely can create such change here at home, at the city and county levels.

Since 2007, the creation, via Iowa Code 28E (new legislation that allows the formation of intergovernmental agreements to include emergency-management projects that cede jurisdictional authority to a newly created body), of the Scott Emergency Communications Center (SECC) has ballooned into a massive new expenditure on the backs of Scott County taxpayers.

Through a series of ever-intrusive policies, including burgeoning agency authority in the newly established SECC board that is autonomous of county supervisory oversight, and a “no-cap tax levy” as an ongoing and mandatory means to pay for the facility, including its building and operations, the SECC is scheduled to open for business in late March 2011.

SECC began as a proposal to consolidate the area’s emergency-dispatch system under one umbrella operation, promising to save taxpayers $4.6 million over 20 years. In truth, not only is there no savings, but it will cost Scott County taxpayers $7 million annually, up from the $4 million per year it would have cost if we had followed Virginia consultant CTA Communications' "Scott County Emergency Responders Consolidation" study we paid $103,000 for in 2006.

What was supposed to be the consolidation of a specific service – emergency dispatching – occupying 6,000 square feet at a cost of $2 million plus another $4 million to equip it has morphed into a monstrous 28,000-square-foot facility, costing us $14 million for the building and other improvements, and another $14 million for equipment, plus an additional $3 million for the GIS that provides mapping for emergency management.

There is no possible justification for the sheer magnitude of a facility such as this serving a county population of 166,650 in 2009 (up from 158,668 in 2000). Which begs the question: Why? My prediction is that this is one of a string of such facilities that will dot the heartland – federal Fusion Centers – established on the backs of taxpayers in county jurisdictions. In other words, county taxes are paying the lion's share of a federal facility under the authority of the Department of Homeland Security.

And even though Scott County has received approximately $6.2 million in federal and state grants, the cost to taxpayers in qualifying for these public funds has been egregious. We ultimately will have spent $31 million to attract $6.2 million in grant funds for SECC . This is fiscal incompetence, especially under current economic conditions. The new SECC now represents the second-largest budget item in the county budget.

NOTE: On February 1, 2011 the Scott County Emergency Management Agency (SCEMA) held a public hearing for the SECC911 FY12 Annual Budget. Iowans For Accountability has posted a video of this public hearing and a blog posting by Reader publisher Todd McGreevy accompanies the video.

In 2007, at the time the SECC project was voted on by Davenport and Bettendorf city councils and the Scott County Board of Supervisors, the public was told the levy would be 53 cents per $1,000. Now, in 2011, the rate is actually 90 cents per $1,000! And this is a "no-cap tax levy"! This is only the beginning, folks. The new legislative authority for this levy is found in 29C of the Iowa Code. You can bet this new taxing ability will be implemented whenever and wherever possible.

In the case of SECC, all three bodies ceded authority for all expenditures to the SECC board, which has the newly created authority to spend its budget without oversight by those we elected to do just that. In other words, the two city councils and county board completely abdicated their fiduciary responsibility in this extremely critical matter by giving SECC *carte blanche*.

Consider that the county's own commissioned study, which under the intergovernmental agreement that formed SECC dictated that it be followed for implementing any dispatch-system-consolidation plan, was partially abandoned in practice along the way. The study showed that we could have spent $3 million and gotten the same level of service – a functioning integrated-dispatching system – at a fraction of the cost. Instead, we got something entirely different, without the knowledge – let alone the consent – of the public.

Our supervisors indebted us by bonding for $14 million in equipment costs (including interest, but not including the $3-million bond for the GIS) for 20 years, even though the equipment has an estimated life of seven years at worst, 10 years at best. So we will be paying for equipment for at least 10 years beyond its useful life. Obviously, we will need to purchase replacement equipment along the way, and odds are high it will be more costly in the future. No problem, because there is a "no-cap tax levy" available to pay for it.

The consolidation study called for a first-year capital outlay of $4 million for equipment, not counting the radios (whose omission is highly suspect when doing a study for dispatch consolidation). The county instead bonded for it, along with the $7-million radio purchase (estimated from a separate 2007 radio study) for 20 years.

Interestingly, however, there is no accounting in the consolidation study for the $7-million-radio-equipment expense, only the $4 million for all other equipment in the first year's equipment expenses, even though the equipment bond included both radio and other equipment capital expenditures. In other words, the budget is tied to the consolidation study when convenient, but denounced as inaccurate when it is not, as occurred during the November 2010 SECC board budget-approval meeting.

Meanwhile, this 28,000-square-foot facility, which Scott County taxpayers are obligated to support with a “no-cap tax levy,” projects a staff of 57 employees at an annual cost of $2.7 million in salaries, with benefits calculated at $1.2 million, which represents nearly 50 percent of their salaries!

Divide the building size by the number of employees it will house during a single work shift (approximately 44 workers on site) and you have 636 square feet per employee – the size of a small apartment. What is wrong with this picture? Review the budget for yourself, then compare it to the consolidation study’s recommendations. It won’t take long to see the inconsistencies. Make no mistake: Any shortfalls are already covered with a “no-cap tax levy” increase when necessary.

For years the county has flown under the radar with respect to its budget and spending. Mostly because it was reasonable. Those days are over, as the county extends its reach into our pockets, and into our lives with public programs designed to find new ways to tax our activities. It is no secret that the Environmental Protection Agency is working behind the scenes, through executive order, to implement cap-and-trade principles through state and local green programs, including smart and sustainable growth programming. Congress couldn’t pass cap-and-trade, so it is being implemented through administrative procedural acts that give federal, state, and county agencies authority that has the “effect of law” in imposing programs in their respective jurisdictions, and in some cases creating brand-new jurisdictional authority with intergovernmental agreements and/or regional governments. I cannot state this strongly enough: This programming impacts upon property rights and land use, and is ramping up right here in Scott County. Tip: Watch agendas for “smart planning” and “sustainability.”

The fact that these programs are largely unconstitutional couldn’t matter less to those creating them. But it likely explains why the implementation is often covert and fast-tracked. The new legislative provision for special assessments/levying to pay for these agency programs is evidence that there is no limit to the growth of government, even in the worst of economic times. The only potential hindrance would be an informed elected body voting against giving up their jurisdictional authorities, but this has clearly not been the case with respect to the two city councils and county board that voted for SECC.

The malaise that plagues the nation’s civic endeavors is institutional laziness, propped up through grants and other public subsidies that are dangled like carrots. Counties and cities must comply with a specific set of rules to qualify for the money. Staff and politicians justify imposing these new standards on the public, even while creating taxing authorities to pay for it after the grants run out, by pointing to the grant money as some kind of economic boon. Once counties and cities accept grant money, they are obligated to the program, and must comply with a host of new regulations. Ultimately, however, the taxpayers become the financiers of costly, inefficient, intrusive, and ineffective regulations that do far more harm than good to the public, especially over time. Can you think of any public program for which this has not been the case? Name one public program that boasts proper efficiency and/or containment of costs over time. Grants traditionally enlarge programming rather than reduce costs to taxpayers.

As it stands now, there are additional inconsistencies that deserve serious scrutiny as they relate to SECC: more detailed itemization of budget items to account for all the dollars being spent (e.g., the 2012 budget appears to be missing the $750,435 annual equipment debt payment, bringing the actual budget for 2012 to $7,939,317, not the $7,188,882 declared); far greater accountability to the public relative to the operation of this facility; the increase in personnel costs in the first year from the consolidation study's projected $2.9 million to the county's current projection of $4.4 million with no increase in actual number of employees, and a lower annual cost-of-living scale; and reduction of the new levy rate back to the original 53 cents (or less) sold to the public to gain its support for the consolidation of dispatching systems. We are being told the levy rate was increased 37 cents (before the building is even open) because of the cost of radios not being included. Explain how any responsible dispatch service plan/budget omits the cost of radios, a key component, when establishing a new tax-levy rate to pay for it? SECC calls for a $7-million purchase of different radios, and twice as many, to qualify for a $2.7-million federal grant that a special 2007 radio study recommended. The radio study estimated $4,500 per radio. The actual cost is $4,954 each. Obviously there was a bona fide estimate for radio cost in 2007, so why was the estimated tax levy left at 53 cents instead of 90 at that time? Instead, taxpayers were presented with the increase on their property-tax bill this past September.

It is time to re-engage, folks. Monitor the county-board Web site for public hearings (ScottCountyIowa.com/board/agendas.php) and attend some meetings to see how much diligence you think your elected officials are applying to their role as stewards of our resources. Visit ScottCountyIFA.com and sign up for periodic Rubber Stamp Alerts, download the supervisors' contact information, and call your supervisors to get their perspective directly and lend them yours directly.

They are here for your convenience, not the other way around. Unlike DC, these folks are accessible, therefore persuadable. They aren't absent from the field, so to speak, They must listen to the public, continuously. Empower yourself by getting informed, then getting heard. If you can't muster this much civic action, then you deserve nothing less than government's obvious contempt for you.