

Bastions of waste and patronage

As Mayor Nutter rolls out a budget-balancing act today that includes a mix of tax hikes and cuts, he needs to plot moves to further deliver on his recent pledge to consider every option for “a complete restructuring and reform” at City Hall.

It's good to see the mayor trim expenses across a range of city programs, as well as lobby elected officials to hand in the keys to their city-issued cars as a thrift gesture.

Nutter's expected bid to convince City Council members to disqualify elected officials from a costly and controversial deferred-retirement payment program also sends the right message. That's about seeking fiscal savings and ending an obnoxious perk.

But the mayor also has to be willing to lay siege to long-established political fiefdoms and tradition to stem the need for damaging tax hikes.

So if Nutter wants to get even more serious about reform, one bold

move he could push would be to eliminate the jobs of six elected officials who run the city's four row offices. That's the recommendation from a government watchdog group, the Committee of Seventy.

In a compelling report issued Tuesday, Seventy officials called for eliminating the elected posts of clerk, sheriff, register of wills, and the three city commissioners, who oversee elections in Philadelphia. The group correctly concludes that it serves little purpose — other than patronage — to preserve the four offices under elected posts that have been held for decades by some.

By restructuring these offices as city departments under the mayor, or shifting some duties to existing agencies, Seventy projects potential millions in savings. That's why Allegheny County voters scrapped several row offices in 2005.

Doing away with salary and benefits for the six Philadelphia officials

alone would save \$1 million a year. Other savings could come from consolidating back-office functions.

The reforms requiring various approvals from Council, voters, and state lawmakers would take aim at patronage mills that in some ways resemble family businesses.

There's the mother-daughter team of Clerk of Quarter Sessions Vivian T. Miller and her top deputy, Robin T. Jones — an office where repeated critical audits indicate that affairs are mismanaged at best. The City Commission is headed by chairwoman Margaret Tartaglione, who employs daughter Renee Tartaglione as her top aide. Seventy found the ranks of Register of Wills Ronald Donatucci's staff “filled with ward leaders and committee people” — even as it credited Donatucci with a customer-friendly approach.

It simply stands to reason that wringing out patronage hires will save taxpayers money. With the mayor's leadership, that could happen.