

Mayor's Column
March 5, 2018

I recently returned from the three day New York State Mayors' Conference in Albany. I find it one of the most productive gathering of minds. The Mayors who show up and attend in the hundreds tend to be less political and quite collegial. Using the philosophy of not reinventing the wheel, so many ideas, documents and cautionary tales are shared which have saved me hours at our local level. Though quite collegial and upbeat, it often can be rooms of shared frustration with a sense of déjà vu because it is quite clear to the powers that be that elected officials are not "special interests" like police, teachers, fire unions and tort attorneys. Our constituencies are everyone, but in a sense, no one so our voices don't offer reach to the levels of influence of those with election fund coffers and voting blocs.

But we are uniquely optimistic and craft legislative priorities on a yearly basis with the hope that some of the items will at least be brought to the attention of lawmakers and the public at large.

The following is the list we compiled together with unanimous agreement and I urge you to reach out to our legislators if any topic particularly resonates for you.

Increase Unrestricted State Aid to Municipalities

A recent Cornell University survey identified stagnant State aid as one of the top contributors to local government fiscal stress in New York. Municipalities have suffered through nine straight years without an aid increase, receiving \$715 million annually in contrast to the \$24 Billion directed to school districts. In fact, the Governor's proposed budget increases aid to school districts this year by \$770 million, more than the aggregate amount received by all communities in the state. The 2% tax cap which has been well below 2% virtually since its inception, only accentuates the need for further growth in unrestricted State aid.

Amend the Tax Cap

- Make the cap a true 2% akin to the State governments "voluntary" cap and delink it from inflation. (There were years the cap was actually .2%)
- Provide an exclusion from the cap for municipal expenditures on public infrastructure just as school district and the State have from their respective caps.

Increase State Funding for Water and Sewer Infrastructure

We are all addressing crumbling sewer and storm water systems with much of the infrastructure over 100 years old including our own. No one has been able to keep pace with the constant deterioration of pipes. A fund would help all of us address our systems before expensive crises emerge.

Prohibit Unfunded State Mandates

Statutory or regulatory mandates which impose a direct or indirect fiscal burden on local governments should be prohibited unless an appropriation is made sufficient to hold local governments harmless. During the past legislative session, the Governor signed three very expensive bills relating to volunteer firefighter disability benefits, paid leave, and filing deadlines for disability benefits that added fiscal burdens to local government.

Increase Funding for Local Roads

Again, funding for needed road and bridge repairs have remained flat despite the accelerated deterioration of roads and bridges. As illustration, local governments are now required to buy more eco-friendly blacktop

mixes that incorporate old street pavement. Though clearly a savings on oil reserves, the roads are proving to have a life span of a third less than conventional blacktop mixtures.

Authorize Municipalities to Charge for Services Provided to Tax-Exempt Properties

Local governments, at local option, should be permitted to defray the cost of local services provided such as police protection, fire protection, street maintenance and lighting and sanitation services. Currently, municipalities are expressly prohibited from charging for some of the most costly services, chief among them police and fire services.

In 2017, Gannet newspaper conducted a study of tax exemptions in New York State that highlighted the magnitude of the issue. Approximately \$866 billion in property is exempt from local taxes; the number of wholly exempt parcels in New York grew from 179,420 in 1999 to 219,602 in 2016, a 22% increase; and the value of those properties more than doubled from \$276 billion to \$576 billion over the same period.

Level the Sales Tax Playing Field

As a result of the rapid increase in e-commerce, Main Street brick and mortar businesses are at an unfair disadvantage. In addition, local sales tax revenue that villages and towns receive is determined by their respective county governments. Mayors support providing a role for towns and villages in negotiating these sharing agreements.

Restructure the Local Gross Receipts Tax

One of the few sources of local non-property tax revenue available to local governments is a tax on communication services. Due to the fact that the laws governing the topic were written decades ago, villages and cities, unlike both the State and New York City are governed by statutes that do not include cellular services. In recognition of the predominance of wireless technology, local governments want the same privilege.

Election Reforms

In a very interesting development, Governor Cuomo's 2018–19 Executive Budget includes a proposal to amend the State Constitution to allow New Yorkers to register and vote on the same day. In addition, the Executive Budget would enact a system of automatic voter registration when someone applies for a driver's license. It would also authorize early voting in all special, primary, and general elections. This would require early voting polling sites to be open for a period of 12 days prior to special, primary, and general elections.