

Mayor's Column

June 7, 2016

In response to calls to Governor Cuomo and the legislature from virtually every local government for relief from unfunded state mandates, the Governor answered at a press conference in mid-May with a two-fold solution: spend less money at the local government level and consolidate smaller communities with neighboring municipalities.

Neither of these alternatives are grounded in fact or community support which prompted me to write this defense of small towns and villages and their vital role in shaping the fabric of New York.

On the spending directive, our Village has complied in spades. Our police department, public works department and administrative staff are at their leanest in over half a century. The village percentage of your tax bill has steadily decreased so it is approximately 18 cents of your Village tax dollar. The State budget has not followed suit.

What solely drives our current local municipal tax increases are our obligations to New York State government. As example, just in my tenure, our debt to the pension fund has risen from five figures to over \$1.155 million. In addition, we now pay a state mandated payroll tax for Metro North equating to almost half a tax point as well as our share of a staggering \$1.3 million "MTA platform maintenance tax" assessed via your town taxes. Residents using the same trains and platforms in Connecticut towns and villages pay none of these fees.

As further example, there is also a New York State law that sets local reimbursement rates for municipal vehicular tickets and caps the local share at \$15.00 regardless of the ticket amount. So if your fine is \$125.00, \$110.00 is sent to Albany and the Village actually loses money when police and judicial time are factored in.

In the recent legislative session, a bill providing for raises for District Attorneys and an increased requirement for indigent legal defense will also be funded solely at the local, not state level. Currently, 200 unfunded mandates come down the pipeline to the local governments.

It is quite easy to say state taxes are not outpacing local ones when you have a "trickle down" system to absorb the costs. Local governments become the final stop on the money train. And it doesn't appear the end is near as the Governor will not support a bill currently proposed that would require the state to fully fund any new or expanded mandates passed by the legislature and approved the Governor.

The Governor's solution to our local "overspending" is consolidation of our communities.

As he has repeatedly said, “I support consolidations. I think if you said to the taxpayer of most districts in the state, I know you like your home and identity, but is it worth \$2000 a year, (the supposed though unverified savings from a consolidation), to have my name and identity, they would say, “change my name”.

The statistics simply don't bear this out. Since the most recent revision of the Consolidation Law was enacted in 2007, one community in the state, Altmar population 407, has consolidated with their neighbor. The Governor has been a zealous proponent of consolidation since he was Attorney General. His office at the time actually submitted a bill allowing any citizen of New York State to start the process of dissolution of a Village, regardless of whether he or she lived in that village, by garnering the support of just 10% of the residents who voted in that Village's last Mayoral election. To put the Governor's bill in context, a non-resident would need to find only eight Bronxville residents to force a Village-wide referendum or vote on dissolution. The incredibly flawed bill was amended several times but the new bill that was passed has provisions that require communities to vote on their own dissolution before consolidation plans and financial impact statements are produced. The Village of Seneca Falls went this route and is now mired in years of litigation as to cost sharing and financial obligations with its merged town.

Consolidation is not a quick fix panacea. Based on the federal census of local governments per capita, there is also no correlation between the number of governmental layers and a person's relative tax burden. Two of the most intensely governed states are New Hampshire and Oklahoma, yet they are two of the least taxed. New York and New Jersey are near the bottom in governmental units, yet near the top in tax burden. Again the result of the “trickle down” policy of payment.

As to service delivery, if we consolidated with Tuckahoe and Eastchester, we would need the same number of snow plows and operators as no taxpayer would want to wait until noon as the plows worked in two other communities. The same is true with garbage. Trash on the streets at noon on a summer's day is equally unacceptable. The pension obligations also don't disappear with consolidation nor do decades of individual municipality's debt obligations.

“Spend less” and “consolidate” have political appeal in their simplicity of message, but they simply don't correlate either with the facts or the sentiment of the electorate.

At his May 17th press conference, Governor Cuomo said, “You (the local governments) have to be most cost conscious.” We ask the same of Albany.