

Mayor's Column
March 9, 2015

In early February, the Siena College Research Institute conducted a statewide poll of registered voters to assess their views of government in New York.

Overall, 66% of the respondents thought their local governments were on the "right track" while 42% thought our state government was headed in the wrong direction.

In evaluating whether the state or the local governments do a better job at three fundamental governmental tasks – protecting and managing tax dollars, understanding and responding to your needs and getting important things done – New Yorkers by a substantial margin chose their local governments.

As to stewardship of tax dollars, 54% of those polled believed local governments to be more responsible vs 30% who favored state government.

Only 20% thought New York State government was best at responding to their needs vs 70% who counted on their local officials.

As to getting things accomplished, 57% of respondents thought their local government was doing a better job vs 33% had faith in the State delivery system.

I personally agree with the poll results and subscribe to Jefferson's view that, "government is best closest to the People."

I recently went to a lecture by former First Lady Rosalyn Carter on this topic and her view struck the same chord.

From her vantage point, President Carter's first elected position as a local councilman was both the most rewarding and most stressful for them as a team.

Her reasoning being, when you accomplished something for a citizen, you experienced the positive result in real time and it almost always benefited someone you knew which brought a great deal of satisfaction.

Conversely, if things were not so successful or discordant, you heard about it in the grocery store or at school pick-up and it weighed heavily on your mind.

As President Carter ascended the political ladder, the constituent you knew all so well because they lived down the street or went to the same church now became a little more amorphous as they transformed into the “electorate,” the “voting public” even “the opposition.”

Mrs. Carter and the New York State voters polled concur that distance in government diminished accountability.

In fairness, Jefferson also said, that “Government is best which governs the least.” And by no means do I think the poll results were a paean to local government, just an interesting snapshot. We all know some of the scariest words in the English language are, “I’m from the government and I’m here to help.”

Probably the most telling result of the poll was a clear misconception by the responders as to the way their property tax dollars are allocated vis a vis school districts and municipal services.

Those polled estimated that 42% of their property tax bill was for school purposes and 58% for municipal services. In fact, the average NYS tax payer spends 60% of his local tax “pie” on the school system vs 40% for local government. In our Village, the delta is significantly higher with an 81.81% school – 18.19% Village tax dollar split.

The polled public had a strong opinion as to the use of this year’s onetime \$5 Billion windfall in the State’s coffers due to the monetary penalties agreed to by some financial institutions. Over 42% thought the monies should be spent on infrastructure repairs. By a 2 to 1 margin, voters additionally believed that local infrastructure repairs be given precedence over state projects.

These results run counter to Governor Cuomo’s preference, as expressed in his proposed Executive Budget, to divert a significant portion of these funds to keep toll costs flat on the New York State Thruway for the coming year.

The poll respondents’ opinion is also in contrast to the 2% tax cap legislation’s language which forbids local municipalities to exempt the cost of infrastructure repairs from the tax ceiling even though school districts and the State budget are accorded this statutory exemption.

Not only is this legislation a powerful disincentive to do local repairs, it is also appears to be a disconnect with the will of the electorate.

As illustration, the State Comptroller estimates that in the year 2012, \$1.2 Billion was spent on local infrastructure repairs when in fact \$3.9 Billion or 325% more was actually needed.

State Comptroller Di Napoli also released a report confirming that local governments statewide are doing less with less because of the economic landscape.

Local revenues grew 1.9% and 1.4% respectively in FYE 2012 and 2013, just barely keeping pace with inflation.

In contrast, employee benefit expenditures increased on average 6.7% per year from 2010-2013, far outpacing the parallel .05% in expenditure growth.

State aid did not alleviate any of the local government shortfalls and the outlook for additional help from Albany is bleak. As it stands, school districts are projected to receive \$2.2 Billion in the next state budget vs \$750 million for municipalities.

This makes the upcoming Village budget cycle as challenging as ever as the Trustees and I balance spending with delivery of services.