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Give up a little local control for overall good

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GUEST ESSAYIST

As noted in a Democrat and Chronicle editorial "Update New York" (Oct. 16), the state comptroller has released a report describing the crazy patchwork of over 4,200 local governments in New York state. The report bluntly states, "Starting from scratch, no one would design the system of local government operating in New York State today."

This is not news. The greater Rochester community has been talking about consolidating local government functions and structures for years. Despite many reports from across the state that demonstrate how consolidating local governments could save millions of dollars, very little has changed. So what's holding us back?

First, the state Constitution and state laws created over centuries have boxed us in and severely limited the flexibility needed to develop creative new local forms of government that could be responsive to local preferences while providing regional services more efficiently. The next governor should become a forceful advocate for eliminating these barriers to change. Once those barriers are removed, however, the responsibility for creating change will fall squarely on the shoulders of citizens in each community.

Based on my experience across the state, two recurring themes explain why there is such resistance to change.

First, many citizens voice the concern that "I don't want to give up my local level of government because then I won't have access to local elected officials who are looking out for my best interest." Citizens also argue against giving up what they currently have by using this argument: "I know that it costs me a little extra to have my own fire department, school district, sewer district, village, etc., but it only costs me an extra \$400 per year, which is only \$1 per day, and I'm willing to pay \$1 per day for the extra service."

The problem is, all of those \$1-per-day services add up, which is why New York has the nation's highest tax burden. The recent example from the town of Gates illustrates the problem beautifully. The majority of town residents don't want to give up the services they have, even if they have to pay more taxes.

What this means is that fundamental change in our local government structures is not going to occur until some or all of us are willing to give up something, whether it be local control or our local school building, fire station, Little League field or any of the millions of other small costs that add up to our crushing tax burden.

We're all playing a game of chicken right now, trying to hold onto the past without giving anything up, and until a critical mass of leaders and/or citizens steps forward to say "I'll give up ... because it will make the greater community better off," don't expect any significant changes to occur in how our governments are organized, and the subsequent cost of government. Zettek is director, Government Management Services, Center for Governmental Research. E-mail him at CZettek@cgr.org.

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