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Long Island Officials Weigh Two Sides of Consolidation

By **KEN BELSON**

It is a Sisyphean task that politicians on Long Island have struggled with for decades: how to eliminate some of the hundreds of often overlapping municipalities and special districts that have resulted in a maze of regulations and driven up taxes.

A Contrast Between Suburbs

The Long Island Index compared per capita spending by local government agencies in Nassau and Suffolk Counties with that in Fairfax and Loudoun Counties in northern Virginia, a demographically similar region.

Study results, based on per capita spending

EXPENSE TYPE	LONG ISLAND	NORTHERN VIRGINIA	HOW MUCH MORE OR LESS IS SPENT IN LONG ISLAND
Education	\$2,650	\$1,816	+834
Police	400	156	+244
Public assistance	345	181	+164
Hospitals	120	0	+120
Highways	147	50	+97
Higher education	96	0	+96
Fire protection	104	106	-2
Other	1,700	1,531	+169
Total	5,562	3,840	+1,722

The New York Times

The push was renewed again last week when the Nassau County executive, [Thomas R. Suozzi](#), said in his State of the County address that the many layers of government “have served as wasteful pockets of patronage which add up to high-tax inefficiency.”

“We all agree it’s a mess,” he said. “Now let’s clean it up.”

But as Mr. Suozzi knows, it has been nearly impossible to persuade local officials, from fire chiefs to school board members, to cede control voluntarily. And residents fear that consolidation will reduce access to local officials and erode basic services.

But according to a crucial finding in a study that is to be made public today by the Long Island Index, merging municipalities does not necessarily mean less service. The Long Island Index, which is financed by the Rauch Foundation, a nonprofit group, compared per capita spending in Nassau and Suffolk Counties with that in Fairfax and Loudoun Counties in northern Virginia.

While the regions have similar demographics, housing prices and population densities, Long Island has a total of 239 counties, cities, towns, villages and school districts (and another 200 special districts), compared with the two northern Virginia counties, which have 17.

The extra layers, as well as more higher personnel costs, are a big reason local governments on Long Island spent \$15.5 billion in 2002, more than triple what the two counties in Virginia spent.

Long Island residents spent \$5,562 per capita for public services, 45 percent more than in the two Virginia counties.

But to the surprise of the study's authors, 88 percent of those surveyed in Fairfax and Loudoun Counties said, for example, that services provided by police officers, firefighters and teachers were good or excellent, while on Long Island the figure was 75 percent.

Nearly two-thirds of the Virginians polled said that there was a good balance between the property taxes they pay and the services they receive. On Long Island, only one-third said they felt that way.

“When you talk to people on Long Island, people say they like to have a lot of little governments all over the place because they get a better form of service,” said Charles Zettek Jr., director of the Center for Governmental Research in Rochester, which helped compile the report. “But what was striking is people in Virginia get good service, too. There’s a disconnect between reality and perception.”

Like much of the Northeast, the roots of Long Island's home rule stretch back centuries to a time when states decided it was more practical to give local

municipalities more autonomy. Local officials can generally regulate anything not codified by the state.

Virginia, by contrast, is governed by what is known as the Dillon Rule, which was introduced in the 1800s to rein in corrupt local officials by centralizing power in state capitals.

With fewer separate governments and service providers, the study found that Fairfax and Loudoun saved money by buying several fire trucks rather than different departments buying one apiece. In the case of school districts and other public organizations, fewer public workers were needed.

The two Long Island counties employ 13 percent more government workers than Fairfax and Loudoun, and spend 83 percent more on payrolls, largely because the police and teachers on Long Island are guaranteed the right to bargain collectively and seek arbitration in salary negotiations, the report said.

These costs are passed on to residents in the form of higher taxes.

Long Island residents pay 60 percent more, or \$903, in property taxes, even though median home prices are almost \$21,000 lower than in northern Virginia. Not surprisingly, 84 percent of those polled on Long Island said they considered the taxes extremely serious or very serious.

Still, Gerald E. Connolly, chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, said his county was too reliant on property taxes because the state often prohibited local governments from creating new taxes.

That said, Mr. Connolly added that the Balkanization of Long Island's municipalities "bakes in costs and makes it inefficient," something that Mr. Suozzi in Nassau and the county executive in Suffolk, [Steve Levy](#), say they are eager to change.

Mr. Levy said he asked the Long Island Regional Planning Board in January to study how special taxing districts could be consolidated. But in an interview yesterday, he said that it was impractical to try to merge some of the county's 69 school districts because "Long Islanders love local control." He added that it was

realistic to hire one security company for all of the districts, to consolidate bus services and to pool borrowing and purchasing to save money.

In the end, however, Mr. Levy said that he expected resistance because “there are a lot of sacred cows out there that special interests like to protect.”

If New Jersey is any guide, consolidation will not be easy. In 2004, Gov. [James E. McGreevey](#) tried to eliminate nonoperating school districts — districts with no schools — but backed down after neighboring schools protested against the extra administrative burden they would have inherited.

Last year, Gov. [Jon S. Corzine](#) and state lawmakers included consolidating municipalities in their proposals to overhaul the state’s property taxes, the highest in the nation, but local officials at town hall meetings shouted them down.

Perhaps with an eye to New Jersey, Mr. Suozzi is instead hoping that within a year, enough studies will be done that show how many municipalities and districts can be merged and how much money can be saved in the process.

“People are afraid of change and will try to protect their vested interest,” he said. “But if we don’t change, your taxes will continue to go up, young people will move away and pockets of poverty will persist.”

Befitting a younger, faster-growing suburb, northern Virginians cited traffic and congestion as their No. 1 worry, followed by overcrowding and overbuilding.

Whether Virginia’s more centralized government can solve these problems is debatable, but it is clear that there are some difficulties accommodating idiosyncrasies that develop as towns and cities evolve.

Mr. Connolly, in Fairfax County, said that a few years ago, the state decided that all school buses must be yellow. When county officials wanted to paint the tops of their buses white to reduce heat, they had to go to Richmond, the state capital, to have the law changed.

“What a waste of energy,” Mr. Connolly said.