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Report may help case for mergers of governments

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ALBANY — Members of a panel studying how to shrink the number of local governments in the state said Friday they hope a new report that found government costs far higher on Long Island than in a similar area of Northern Virginia will help them make their case.

“I think it's a compelling case when you compare counties that are very similar and find one has fewer units of municipal government and fewer school districts and also has lower property taxes,” said former Lt. Gov. Stan Lundine. He is the chairman of a commission appointed by Gov. Eliot Spitzer in April to study how to consolidate local governments. The panel is slated to make recommendations next year.

The new study, done by the Center for Governmental Research in Rochester, found that taxpayers on Long Island spend 30 percent more for local-government services than those who live in Fairfax and Loudoun counties in Virginia, which are similar in wealth, housing costs and demographics.

Despite their lower costs, residents in Virginia are more satisfied with the services they get from their local governments, and more Virginians (79 percent) than Long Islanders (64 percent) had a favorable opinion of their county governments.

Another key difference: Long Island (Nassau and Suffolk counties) has 439 units of local government, compared with nine in the two Virginia counties.

“Everyone conceptually agrees we should begin to consolidate so we could be more efficient,” said the report's author, Charles Zettik, who estimated property taxes could be cut as much as 10 percent if government structures were rationalized. “We know we have to make this change. The challenge is how do you get people to agree to make the change?”

Political scientists and budget watchdogs have complained for decades that the state's crazy-quilt system of more than 700 school districts, 553 villages, 932 towns, 863 fire districts, 62 cities and 62 counties is not only inefficient but also expensive.

But consolidation has proven a hard sell politically, as people generally have wanted to stick with local boards and officials they know.

Yet experts say that's one reason the state's property taxes, which fund the bulk of local-government operations and more than half of school spending, soared 42 percent between 2000 and 2005 — about triple the inflation rate. The property taxes New Yorkers pay are among the highest in the country.

Long Island's property taxes were among the highest in the state per person in 2002 — \$2,400, according to the report, but still behind Westchester's \$2,684.

In comparison, the figure for Fairfax, Va., was \$1,547.

The figures for schools were among the starkest. The per-pupil spending on education in Northern Virginia was \$12,032, compared with \$17,392 for Long Island.

One reason: the two counties in Virginia are served by three school districts. The two Long Island counties have 127.

“It stands to reason there is a lot less overhead with fewer districts,” said SUNY New Paltz Dean Gerald Benjamin, another member of Spitzer’s consolidation commission.

But there is another cause as well: the report found that teachers on Long Island make far more than those in Virginia. The cost was \$4,609 per student in Virginia compared with \$7,187 on Long Island.

“Teacher salaries isn’t something our commission is going to get into,” Lundine said. But he added that reducing the number of administrators should save money.

“There has been some nibbling” at the benefits of teachers and other public employees in New York, Zettik said, as the costs of things like defined-benefit pensions and health insurance have increased rapidly.

Spitzer’s two immediate predecessors, Republican George Pataki and Democrat Mario Cuomo, appointed similar commissions, but little changed as a result. There have been a small number of consolidations, mostly villages being merged into towns.

Last year the Legislature set aside \$25 million for grants to encourage consolidations, although only about \$11 million was allocated. More grants will be announced next week, a spokesman for the Department of State said Friday.

If this latest effort to sell consolidations is to succeed, “we have to stop tilting at windmills,” Benjamin said. “People are attached to local governments. We have to be smart and respectful of that” while at the same time pointing out the advantages of mergers.

“People like simplicity,” said Benjamin, a former county legislator who recalls getting stopped frequently on the street by people asking about issues he had no power over. “In terms of democracy and accountability, simplicity is better.”
