

Consolidating Governments Is About More than Just Saving Money

Consolidating local governments in New York is a hot topic across the state. Proponents maintain consolidation is a way to make local governments more efficient and less costly. Opponents argue that services will be cut, local representation will be lost, and savings will be minimal at best. Every week, I receive calls from local government officials across upstate asking what is involved in studying how to share or consolidate services. Almost invariably, the caller starts out by saying, "I'm not necessarily in favor of dissolving or consolidating, but I feel it is my responsibility to the taxpayers to look at every avenue to reduce our local taxes."

In communities facing crushing tax burdens, citizens are ready to explore alternatives to the status quo. But let's be realistic, in many communities people love to complain about high taxes but really aren't willing to make the changes necessary to attack the problem. It is disingenuous to argue that nothing can be done locally until Albany first fixes the "big" problems. Yes, the bulk of local government costs are driven by state mandates and labor costs, but there is plenty that can be done by local governments themselves. Fortunately, more and more citizens are demanding that local elected leaders look themselves in the mirror and ask whether their layer of government is truly needed, even if it means eliminating their own positions.

There's clearly more at stake here than just trying to reduce local taxes, although that is a good starting point. Making the effort to change has many benefits beyond tax savings, as two local communities are finding out. The City and Town of Batavia have just started a very public debate about whether or not to consolidate into one government. The Village of Seneca Falls has begun a public process that will lead to a vote on whether to dissolve the village and consolidate with the Town of Seneca Falls. What is most encouraging is that these efforts demonstrate the willingness of citizens to consider change, through an open, honest thoughtful civic engagement process. Even if voters ultimately decide not to change their governments, at least the communities will have gone through a thorough analysis of their operations and intentionally selected their governance structures for the future, knowing the pluses and minuses. These are key building blocks for re-invigorating local government for the 21st century.

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