

LOGIN / REGISTER

THIS IS HOW NEW YORK WORKS
CAPITAL BETA

BANNER ART BY TRENTON DUERKSI

ABOUT US CAPITAL WRITERS ADVERTISE CONTACT

FOLLOW US [Twitter] [Facebook] [YouTube] [RSS] [Tumblr]

Cuomo's law highlights a thicket of local government entities, eliminates almost none of them

BY JIMMY VIELKIND

6:45 pm Aug. 25, 2011 | [Share]

GREEN ISLAND, N.Y.—You're an intensely governed person, if you live anywhere near the corner of Hudson and Swan Streets, the heart of this community just below the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers.

You're living in a village, but you're also living in a town that has exactly the same borders as the village. Your children go to the one-building, 300-student school which is the only one in its school district. Your village (and town) has its own power authority and its own industrial development authority. And, naturally, it has its own police and fire protection. All in the service of a community about the size of Prospect Park, with 2,620 residents.



Green Island, N.Y. Doug Kerr via flickr.

Whenever Andrew Cuomo would rant how New York State is being choked by the stratospheric number of local government entities—10,521, by his count—around the state, he surely had a picture of Green Island in his head.

But how big is the problem, actually? And what can Cuomo do about it?

This summer, my colleagues and I at the Albany *Times-Union* took a hard look at local governments in New York, in terms of their true costs and the efficacy of efforts to pare them down. What we found was a nebulous problem without any clear solutions.

For starters, we compared our tiny area of Green Island with a nearby suburb and a small city. We looked at their budgets and tax rates, and what services were provided in each place, all while hearing from officials in each locations that the system they had in place was just fine.

"It maybe looks like a lot of government, but it isn't," said Sean Ward, an Green Island resident who is an aide to the village mayor, a county legislator, an administrator of the sewer and water boards, the CEO of the town's IDA and a former town supervisor. (Total salary: \$108,022, compared to Green Island's median household income of \$40,789.)

Ward's many hats illustrate the ridiculous-looking form of efficiency that has evolved in the enclave.

Sure, things were probably set up the way they were in order to maximize the number of patronage jobs for good Democrats (there are 117 enrolled Republicans in Green Island, compared to 1,146 Democrats). But still, under the current system of sharing duties, some of the expenses are consolidated.

Certainly, the layers have their cost. Green Islanders pay a higher property-tax rate, relative to value, than their neighbors do, even though the village is buoyed by a municipal hydro plant supporting factories along its northern shore and cheap power for residents.

So what, you may ask. Green Islanders vote for their own property taxes. They themselves choose to maintain a microscopic school district, and to pay those cops and firefighters.

But Cuomo's argument is that Green Island's inefficiencies are not victimless and that, in aggregate, the

TODAY'S CAPITAL FEATURE STORIES

Woody's second act: 'Midnight in Paris' may not be 'Annie Hall,' but people keep paying good money to see it

By Sheila OMalley [Share]



Cuomo's law highlights a thicket of local government entities, eliminates almost none of them

By Jimmy Vielkind [Share]



How NY1 won the Irene-hits-New York story, and what national cable news could learn from them

By Tom McGeeveran [Share]



F.A.Q.: Can the idea of a moderate G.O.P. candidate really be that laughable?

By Josh Benson [Share]



CAPNEWSLETTERS [Search]

CONVERSATION

follow us @capitalnewyork

Joepompeo: Re-tweeting this since it got a little buried by the hurricane on Friday: News outlets crowdsource their 9/11 coverage <http://t.co/Nni0oqN>

SAI: Dennis Crowley's Great Hurricane Irene Adventure! by @shontelaylay <http://t.co/pp2Xio5>

SAI: Dennis Crowley's Great Hurricane Irene Adventure! by @shontelaylay <http://t.co/pp2Xio5>

VanityFair: Storm Watch: Hurricane Politicize-Irene Begins as Icy Michele Bachmann-Centric System in Florida <http://t.co/BeY1zIP>

NYCsidewalker: Called @METS: Games playing today and no compensation, refund or exchanges for tickets due to Metro North not running or anything #Hurricane

espiers: "Orchard St was eerily quiet... We'll take a hurricane next week, too, please" <http://t.co/c5XVkip> @NFreeman1234 braves #Irene for a drink

MC_NYC: "Orchard St was eerily quiet... We'll take a

hurricane

NY1

NYPD

Cuomo

Pataki

9/11

Gillibrand

Quinn

Bloomberg

cameras

school

teachers

Verizon

#VMA

Beyonce

Lil Wayne

Twitter

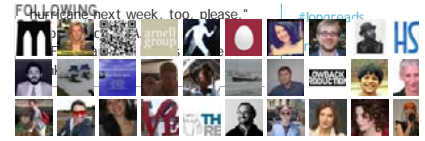
Mets

Yankees

Jets

Giants

capitalnewyork



whole state gets screwed. Businesses won't locate here because our property taxes are too high. And the local spending drives more state spending.

This last point seemed to be supported by our analysis, which found that [state taxpayers send more aid, per resident, to Green Island](#) than it does to some of its neighbors.

The varying levels of state spending on localities don't just track with how many layers of local government there are, of course. There are lots of other factors that figure into the various formulas for state aid, including the wildly different costs of individual school systems, and the wildly different economic needs of localities.

But consolidation can be one way, among others, to bring general costs down.

Gerald Benjamin, a political-science professor and local government expert from SUNY New Paltz, said that having fewer entities means "you have greater accountability, you don't have boards meeting with each other to resolve conflict. Those are efficiencies."

Then let us strip away the layers! That was Cuomo's response in 2008 and 2009, when he was attorney general, and couldn't quite admit he was running for governor. He drafted and pushed for a new law that would make it easier for citizens to petition to dissolve local government entities. Just get the magic number of signatures, and the question of dissolution goes to the voters.

Cuomo said the bill, which became law last year, would tip the balance back in favor of taxpayers. In reality, it hasn't worked because there's no concrete plan for when balloting begins. Ten villages have petitioned to dissolve under the new law, and nine have failed. People who have used the law—like Kevin Gaughan, a Buffalo attorney who campaigned to downsize its suburbs—lament that "the Albany-protectors came, looked at it, and crafted a very clever counternarrative: How can you possibly vote for something for which there is no specific plan?"

So far, the [only place in New York in which Cuomo's downsizing mechanism has actually worked](#) is an inland fishing village in Oswego County: Altmar, population 407.

Altmar is a pretty tired place if you happen to roll in when the salmon and the stripers aren't running. The fish migrate up from Lake Ontario through a hatchery run by the state Department of Environmental Conservation, creating an anglers paradise for several weeks each year that gives life to the local economy.



Residents make a buck selling bait, beer, tackle and trinkets to visiting fishermen, and cleaning their catches. Some locals rent their land as campsites. The local watering hole in the center of town, just up from the stream, set back against the unpainted churches, seems slightly less absurdly named during fishing season. It's called the "Altmar Hotel."

It was there, over \$3.75 bottles of Dogfish Head, that I learned how Altmar decided to dissolve. A man named Bryan Myers had hoped to open a stand on some property he owned

near the riverbank, but he was denied a permit for the curb cut by the mayor of the village, Corey Holcomb. Myers went ahead and cut the curb himself, sparking a dispute that was eventually resolved in court.

Myers was so angered by his experience that he ran against Holcomb. (He was on vacation when I visited Altmar, but for a few weeks didn't return calls to talk about the dissolution.) He lost that race, but licked his wounds long enough to form an alliance with Neal Braley, owner of the local Kwik-E-Mart.

He left the dissolution petitions at his counter, and with the second-closest place to buy milk 20 minutes down the road, made sure they were seen by everyone. The fact he extends credit to some residents surely helped the dissolution vote pass, 80-74.

I was in town for the public hearing about the dissolution plan, drafted by some consultants from the Rochester-based Center for Governmental Research. It lasted 12 minutes. The consultants explained how taxes for village residents would drop under the merger, but people who lived in the town outside the village—which would take over the volunteer fire department, instead of just paying 85 percent of its budget—would see their taxes rise.

Except, that is, for the money the state would send. That's right: you and I will have made Altmar's

MOST ACTIVE STORIES

1. How NY1 won the Irene-hits-New York story, and what national cable news could learn from them
2. A picture of Red Hook as Venice that is pretty close to perfect
3. Woody's second act: 'Midnight in Paris' may not be 'Annie Hall,' but people keep paying good money to see it
4. Cuomo's law highlights a thicket of local government entities, eliminates almost none of them
5. F.A.Q.: Can the idea of a moderate G.O.P. candidate really be that laughable?

DAILY Intel

- Obama Picks Alan Krueger to Replace AUSTAN GOOLSBEE
- Did You Miss George W. Bush's 9/11 Interview Last Night?
- Anonymous Hackers Wear Corporate Masks
- Bloomberg Took the Subway Today
- Bank of America Sells Stake in Chinese Bank for \$8 Billion

dissolution practicable, sending them \$58,006 for something that saves them \$36,540 a year. We also will have paid the \$75,000 owed to the consultants and lawyers who helped shepherd the plan through.

When Gaughan referred to "the Albany-protectors," he was talking about people like Peter Baynes at the New York State Conference of Mayors. Baynes argues that dissolving the layers of government will only get you chump change; the real point is that people need to reduce the services their government provides, which they almost never do.

In Altmar, for example, the plan is to dissolve the village but to create a new entity of government to pay for the streetlights. Residents in the village will pay for the lights in a newly formed district. One layer replaces another.

"It sounds like we're getting rid of a layer of government, which is good," Baynes said. "But in almost every instance when a village dissolves, multiple special districts have to be incorporated."

And that assumes an informed vote, which rarely occurs. Senator Jack Martins, a Republican who until last year was mayor of the Nassau County megavillage of Mineola (which is mostly located in the Town of North Hempstead, but also a little bit in the Town of Hempstead), is [sponsoring a bill](#) requiring two votes: one to draft the plan, another to implement it. This seems to be less an improvement to the process than it is a jug of water he's carrying for NYCOM.

Cuomo's point-person on local government consolidation is Dede Scozzafava, a former assemblywoman and [tragically](#) failed congressional candidate whom the governor appointed deputy secretary of state for local governments.

Sure, the process is imperfect, she said. But this is like digging in Manhattan: you've got to deal with [300 years of odd structures](#) that made sense when they were erected, but of course serve little purpose now. We would never design this now, but it's already here. The question is, how do you deal with this without slicing a water main?

"Change isn't easy for anybody, and it's especially not easy for municipalities," Scozzafava said. "And when they look at doing things differently or setting up a different type of structure of government, but the time has come. We're really at a point that we have to have a dialogue, and sometimes to get to the final product, you have to have the communication. You might not get consolidation or dissolution right in the beginning ... Hopefully what we'll have at the end of the day are more efficient government entities that will hold the line or decrease property taxes."

Maybe this is the point. Now that the election is over and the law has passed, Cuomo's efforts on local-government consolidation are no longer on the front burner. But maybe, as Scozzafava suggests, the mere existence of the dissolution law will force pro-bureacracy elected officials to change their tune.

It makes Sean Ward work all those jobs, so when citizens (or some pesky newspaper reporters) [ask questions](#), he can brag about how he's already doing things as efficiently as possible. Add to that the tax-cap Cuomo just pushed through the legislature, [which applies to each one of those special districts](#), and you've got a real squeeze for municipalities.

Mission accomplished?

RELATED TAGS: [CULTURE](#) [ANDREW CUOMO](#) [CONSOLIDATION](#) [DEDE SCOZZAFAVA](#) [GERALD BENJAMIN](#) [GREEN ISLAND](#) [JACK MARTINS](#) [KEVIN GAUGHAN](#) [POLITICS](#)

Comments (0)

[Log in](#) or [sign up](#) to post comments.