

Cuomo Introduces Consolidation Legislation

Rachel Ward (2009-05-22)

ROCHESTER, NY (WXXI) - Government in New York state can look like a wild patchwork quilt - municipalities are piled upon districts upon towns and villages, delivering services. All in all, there are over 10,500 entities keeping the lights on, teaching the kids, putting out fires - and sending bills.

Thursday, the attorney general unveiled legislation that could give communities more control over those costs, and the decision about whether or not to consolidate local governments. Andrew Cuomo started agitating for a streamlined process for citizens to do away with tiny water districts or entire villages last year, kicking off the consolidation drive.

Cuomo called for a bill that would provide a clear path to dissolving a government entity. But the proposal rode under the radar as New York's deficit mounted and lawmakers pounded out a budget.

Now the idea is back - and not too soon according to Brian Kolb, Republican minority leader in the assembly. He's co-sponsoring the bill, with the Democratic majority leader, to help citizens take control of local government.

"There's not really a clear path if a local government or county government wants to look at dissolving a government entity ... so there's more what I would call barriers in the way to get to consolidation or dissolution process done now."

But government consolidation isn't just about tidiness, and making New York's patchwork quilt a little more even. It's also about cash. Lawmakers think a few well-placed consolidations could save taxpayers big - without drawing on state coffers.

Charles Zettek is a researcher with the Center for Governmental Research in Rochester. He says there are examples across the state where villages and towns have overlapping jurisdictions or where two courts could do the job of one.

In order to realize savings - for example, doing away with a paid village board of supervisors by folding the village into an existing town - Zettek says small communities will have to make decisions about what trade-offs they're willing to make.

"In New York State people love talking about high taxes and the need to cut taxes, but on the other hand many people say they want to keep the service levels that they have and unfortunately it's very difficult to keep high services and not reduce costs."

But those tough decisions could be worth making. Zettek says because government expenditures are so high in New York, even a conservative estimate shows that there could be some \$1.4 billion available by pursuing consolidations.

Don't start spending that money yet, though. Zettek admits that savings won't be spread out equally across New York. For example, Long Island has more villages that might be ripe for

consolidation with towns, than the rest of the state does. But Zettek says upstate is more hungry for the savings.

"Localities are facing a fiscal crisis in a way that downstate has not had to face yet. The local economies of Buffalo, Rochester, Binghamton, Syracuse, Utica areas have declined much more rapidly than the New York City area ... so there's more of a push for people trying to figure out how [they] can save costs, as quickly as possible."

Getting to those savings won't be quick though. The newly introduced bill to ease consolidation has bipartisan support from the legislature on up to the governor, but its specifics guarantee that consolidating any governments won't be easy.

If 10 percent of citizens, or 5,000 citizens, whichever is fewer, petition for consolidation, the concept then goes to a town board or other planning body.

They'll study the consolidation proposal and then send it to all the citizens for a vote - a process that could run from months to years.

Democratic assemblyman Joe Morelle of Rochester is one of many assembly co-sponsors of the bill. He says the strength of the legislation is that it puts the decision in the hands of local communities - including the decision not to look for savings by consolidating.

"At the end of the day in America, we've decided that citizens are the ultimate decision-makers. And that's what a free society and democracy is about - the ability to [self-govern]. So it will be incumbent upon people who oppose a consolidation to be able to describe to the citizens why they're better served by the district that they're have, rather than a consolidated district. And that would be all part of the conversation."

That conversation kicks off as the "New New York Government Reorganization and Citizen Empowerment Act" hits the floor of the senate and assembly in the coming days. © Copyright 2009, WXXI