

# We'll pay for good schools

■ But Llers want to cut taxes, too. Strong local leadership is needed to get past the impasse.

BY LEONIE HUDDY

No one looks forward to paying taxes. But during the past few years, Long Islanders have become increasingly dissatisfied with the amount they pay in local property taxes. As a local resident, I feel the pinch, puzzling over the rate at which my property taxes rise each year. As a pollster, I also have the opportunity to study local opinion to understand whether Long Islanders' complaints about their property taxes are reasonable. Do residents accept that less money in means less money out? Or do they unreasonably expect continued high-quality services while paying less for them?

In polls conducted by the Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research for the Long Island Index between 2004 and 2007, we have uncovered a noteworthy number of local residents who are willing to entertain reasonable solutions to the problem of rising taxes. When asked to make an explicit trade-off between keeping "taxes at the same level as last year even if it means cutting back on local services" or increasing "property taxes to keep local services at their current level," more than 3 in 4 choose to cut back on services.

But what services are Long Islanders willing to cut? There is little consensus. When asked to choose areas of low priority for future funding, some residents nominate the police, others mention parks and gardens, and still others choose garbage and sanitation services.

Residents are more united on the services they want to keep, and therein lies the rub. A near majority choose public schools as the local service with the highest priority for increased funding in the coming

year. This choice is made even though most Long Islanders know public schools are the single largest budget item in local property tax bills. A reluctance to cut back on school spending generates mixed public reactions to proposals such as consolidation of school districts.

How do we get beyond this apparent impasse in which local residents are unwilling to entertain cuts to schools, the single largest property-tax budget item? The answer must lie with strong, local leadership.

Long Islanders need budgetary problems to be defined more sharply. What causes school budgets to rise inexorably? When asked, equal numbers of residents choose rising teacher salaries, escalating costs of teachers' retirement and health benefits, increasing building and utility costs, and rising salaries of administrators as the main reasons. But much of this is guesswork. More precise information would help people to make good choices on where to cut.

Strong local leadership is also needed to stand up to the vocal minority who are frequently opposed to any change. For instance, in the 2005 Long Island Index, 58 percent of Long Islanders thought it was a good idea to shift some "funds from wealthier to poorer school districts." This proposal was less popular, however, among homeowners paying in excess of \$7,000 in annual property taxes; 53 percent of those thought it was a bad idea.

This is where leadership comes in. All Long Islanders, regardless of economic background, are concerned about the impact of rising costs on young family members. Politicians who are able to appeal to such common concerns as they develop solutions will more effectively overcome opposition from the vocal minority in order to satisfy the often silent majority who recognize the need for change.



## Special districts mean more taxes

BY HOWARD S. WEITZMAN

There's something peculiar about local government in New York.

In New England, local government is based on towns. In the South and West, it's mostly counties. But in New York State, we've got counties, cities, towns, villages and, on top of those, special-purpose districts galore, running everything from water and lighting to parks and garbage collection. That's a lot of local government, collecting

a lot of taxes.

And Long Island's special districts collect a hugely disproportionate amount of taxpayer money. Nassau and Suffolk contain fewer than 5 percent of these districts but are responsible for half of the state's special-district revenue (31 percent and 19 percent, respectively), or about \$650 million, according to a recent state comptroller's report.

With sanitation districts, the numbers are even starker. Only 15 percent of all garbage districts are in Nassau County, but they account for close to half of all revenue, or about \$181 million per year.

My office has made a study

of garbage districts that shows how we could save money under a different system.

We recently audited a small garbage district serving only 700 families and run by a board of elected commissioners. The district has no employees; it contracts out for garbage service. Yet board members met more than 120 times a year, with each member collecting a per diem payment of \$80 per meeting, usually an hour or so over breakfast.

The fee is particularly striking when you consider that the boards of fire and school districts, arguably our most important small governments, serve without pay, by state law. Yet commissioners of water, sanitary, sewage treatment and parks districts get per-diem payments and often health and retirement benefits — permitted but not required by law.

If school board members and fire district commissioners are willing to spend so many hours in community service without pay, and vie for the privilege of doing so, do we really need to pay commissioners of special districts? Many districts are spending \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year on per diems, not including pension or health benefits.

In addition, commissioner-run districts generally administer services at a higher cost to taxpayers than services provided by towns.

We found, for example, that the 60,000 households that pay taxes to the Town of Hempstead's five commissioner-run sanitary districts could save at least \$14.7 million annually if the town collected their garbage at the same cost per household for which it collects everyone else's.

That's an average saving of \$200 per household.

Why do towns tend to do it for less? Town governments are more professionally run, and town elections have a much higher rate of participation than district elections, providing more citizen oversight. Uniform town collection would provide economies of scale and more efficient use of personnel. And the town can provide its own lawyers, accountants, insurance coverage — all items purchased and paid for by the taxpayers of separate districts.

I have proposed to the State Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness, created by Gov. Eliot Spitzer and on which I serve, that it back legislation requiring towns to operate garbage collection services when more than 75 percent of residents receive such service. The town would absorb operations in special districts, while making commissioners unpaid. Layoffs would be unnecessary: the town would hire the district's employees and eventually pare payroll, if needed, through attrition.

Existing districts could remain as a voice for their constituents. Frequency of pickup and back-door service would be up to local residents. If they vote for a higher level of service than the town normally provides, they would pay more.

These are among the money-saving proposals that the state commission will be considering. To gather other ideas, the commission is holding regional hearings. The next one will be on Long Island July 24 and 25.

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