

# Local Government Commission to Impact State's Future



By Howard Weitzman, Nassau County Comptroller.

Ten years from now I would like to think that the Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness will be viewed as the entity that signaled the arrival of a new age, where words like "efficient," "cost-effective" and "streamlined" go hand-in-hand with the word "government," without sounding like a contradiction in terms. I believe that the work of the Commission took a major step towards making that view of the future a reality when in May it presented its recommendations, a blueprint of sorts, for more efficient, competitive and effective local government for the people of New York.

The Commission's daunting task was to examine ways to strengthen and streamline local government and reduce the tax burden on our residents. As a member of the Commission from heavily populated Nassau County, I was fascinated by the differences and similarities in upstate and downstate communities. The key similarity was obvious: we all have too much government, and the multiple layers of government have to be pruned to bring the property tax burden under control. Yet upstate and downstate residents alike want to keep the quality of their services and no proposal to eliminate layers of government can work without that important assurance.

Many upstate areas have too small a population to support the multiple governments that exist. Nassau County has no lack of people; the State's largest town, the Town of Hempstead, has a population of over 760,000, yet our taxpayers also find too many governments have their hands in residents' pockets.

As a member of the Commission, I focused on the issue of commissioner-run special taxing districts. No county in the state has more commissioner-run taxing districts than my home county of Nassau, with over 100. Residents of the Town of Hempstead may get their garbage picked up by a village, the town, or a commissioner-run sanitation district. Water can be provided by the town, a commissioner-run water district, an authority, or a private company. These services are provided at widely variant costs for no discernable reason.

Audits by my office have found rampant waste and abuse in commissioner-run districts, along with a few well-run

districts. Commissioners in Nassau, unlike most elsewhere in the rest of the state, are paid per diems; unsurprisingly many find it necessary to meet three to four times a week. In addition they receive health coverage, including lifetime retiree health benefits. My upstate colleagues were shocked to find that our sanitation and water commissioners did not serve as volunteers the way school board members and fire commissioners do.

I reported to the Commission that my office had done a comparison of the cost of garbage, water, and fire service by the many entities providing services in Nassau County. In the case of sanitation districts, a real taxpayer savings opportunity existed. The commissioner-run districts charged taxpayers over \$10 million a year more than the towns did for the same level of service.

The commissioners discussed these issues and made many proposals to reform special districts ranging from a referendum to keep them in place to a ban on pay and benefits for commissioners. Our discussions were lively and we did not always agree. Dissents are noted in the Commission Report. You'll find that while I heartily endorsed elimination of commissioner pay and benefits and having the towns take over sanitation operations, I could not agree that it was necessary to require that districts receive a majority vote to continue to exist. In my view the key was saving taxpayer money. The first two proposals were proven money savers; the latter proposal would not necessarily have that effect.

My colleagues and I came to these recommendations, along with many others, after formal public hearings in Saratoga Springs, Long Island, Buffalo, and the Hudson Valley, where we heard from panels on school issues, smart growth, upstate cities, and local government layers. We also heard from speakers representing municipal associations, professional organizations, citizen's groups, and themselves.

The Commission also held formal dialogue sessions with the Association of Towns, the NYS Association of Counties, and the NYS School Boards Association at their annual meetings. Additionally, staff and Commission members spoke at a variety of other conferences, including those for Civil Service personnel, highway superintendents, transportation planners, government accountants, economic development groups, the NY Conference of Mayors, and the NYS School Superintendents Association.

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We benefited from briefings by academics who had studied the issues of governmental consolidation and reform. Some of these highly-regarded academic resources included Albany Law School's Government Law Center, Brookings Institution Metropolitan Studies Program, Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, Pace Law School and the Fiscal Policy Institute.

In May 2008 the Commission presented its recommendations that laid out a path to a far more efficient and effective local government system. The 69-page report submitted to New York State Governor David Paterson included 73 recommendations regarding costs-saving initiatives through consolidation, shared services and controlling property taxes. Which ones become law will be up to the Legislature and we all know that it can be a long road to enacting reforms. I am hopeful that some of the proposals will become law and will lead to real tax savings for our residents.

In a nutshell, the Commission's work revealed three essential truths, when it comes to the search for better efficiency in government.

- Governments can save money through sharing services.
- Services will stay the same, or even improve, through shared services.
- Government offices need to be run more professionally for New York State to remain competitive.

I am very pleased that the work of the Commission will continue, through a Center for Local Government Efficiency. This Center could be established without new costs, in the same manner the Commission has operated, utilizing the resources of the many state agencies with missions related to local government efficiency. It would extend the Interagency Task Force which is supporting local reform efforts. This effort could continue the work necessary to implement the recommendations, and would be in a position to follow-up with a continuing focus on local efficiency. 🏠

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