



NEW YORK STATE COMMISSION ON
LOCAL GOVERNMENT
EFFICIENCY &
COMPETITIVENESS

This e-mail bulletin provides information on efficiency issues and recent events related to local government cooperation, consolidation and modernization.

Poll Shows Public Support for Consolidation

A [new poll](#) in Monroe County shows a large majority willing to support governmental consolidation. The 2008 Voice of the Voter poll of 500 likely voters found that 73% would support merging some layers of county, municipal and town governments if it meant a substantial savings on their tax bill (and only 15% were opposed). This poll is carried out annually by the news media in the county, and covers many issues.

Lake George Receives First High Priority Planning Grant

The Village of Lake George received a High Priority Planning Grant (\$44,999) to help prepare a dissolution plan for consideration by village voters in March 2009. A dissolution plan identifies what will happen to village property, services, and employees following a vote to dissolve. This grant is the first to be awarded under a new noncompetitive High Priority Grant Planning Grant category of the Local Government Efficiency Grant program. These grants can provide much more rapid funding for consolidation or village dissolution studies, county-wide or multi-county shared services and changes to city or county charters related to service sharing or consolidation.

Applications for High Priority Planning Grants are accepted continuously, and additional information is available for these and other categories within the Local Government Efficiency Grant program from the Department of State's [website](#).

Moving from Elected to Appointive Positions

Several propositions converting or combining local elective positions were passed by voters in this month's elections.

- The towns of Dewitt and Van Buren (Onondaga County), and Ossian (Livingston County), voted to combine the position of tax receiver with that of town clerk, eliminating separately-elected tax receivers.
- The Village of Lancaster voted to reduce the size of the village board from six trustees to four.
- Nassau County residents voted to make their county assessor an appointed position, rather than elected.

Skyrocketing Local Costs for Employee Benefits

Recent data from the State Comptroller's Office show dramatic increases in employee benefit costs, highlighting the need for reforms in these areas. The [2008 Annual Report on Local Governments](#) provides information on recent trends, legislation, and activities of the Comptroller's Office over the past year. Some highlights:

- Between 2001 and 2006, employee benefits costs increased at an average annual growth rate of almost 12 percent, compared to total expenditures which increased by about 4.4 percent annually, or inflation of 2.5 percent.
- In 2006, employee benefits accounted for 14.6 percent of total expenditures for counties, cities, towns and villages.
- State and local governments spend nearly double on benefits for their workers compared to private-sector employers - \$13.24 per hour worked versus \$7.66, respectively.
- The largest category of functional expenditure in cities (29 percent) and villages (20 percent) was public safety, and in towns it was highways (20.2 percent).

School Boards Task Force Issues Efficiency Recommendations

A statewide task force of the NYS School Boards Association has released a list of suggestions to reduce taxpayer costs and maximize the effectiveness of school programs in this era of limited resources. The [Report of the Task Force on Maximizing School District Resources](#) includes 55 recommendations covering various areas, including many examined by the Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness (LGEC). In fact, nearly a third of the recommendations are taken from among the LGEC recommendations on schools and mandate relief. These include recommendations on public pensions, health insurance, local committees to consider consolidations of school services or districts, collective bargaining, property tax assessment and collection improvements, procurement reforms, school-municipal cooperation, reform of outdated operating rules and encouraging shared back-office services.

Justice Court Consolidation

There are more than 1,250 town and village justice courts, each funded and operated by its own municipality with mostly part-time justices. Chief Judge Judith Kaye appointed a special commission to examine these courts and to develop ways to address serious inefficiencies in their organization, avoid due process violations or other legal errors, and end reliance on substandard court facilities. Key recommendations from the Chief Judge's Commission [report](#) are to:

- Establish a set of standards for court facilities, resources, security and other requirements that would be enforced statewide, to ensure that all courts are safe and fit for judicial proceedings.

- Reduce the number of Justice Courts through a process of consolidation and reform, utilizing county review panels directed to assess which courts meet (or can be improved to meet) the new minimum standards, and which should be combined.

The report stated, “At the local level, it often makes little sense for there to be two or more courts operating a few miles or even blocks from one another, as the overlap in services can be wasteful for the taxpayers in each of the localities that fund the courts... In short, the overabundance of Justice Courts creates enormous burdens on taxpayer-funded resources at the local, county and state levels.”

Although much more detailed, the recommendations from the Chief Judge’s group are very similar to the resolution on justice courts included in the report from the Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness. LGEC recommended that the Office of Court Administration develop guidelines for possible court consolidation; that barriers to consolidation be removed; and that merger disincentives tied to fees and fines be eliminated. Poor internal controls in justice courts have been in focus for some time, and a State Comptroller’s [audit](#) in 2005 concluded that structural changes were necessary to address these and other problems.

Empire Page Interviews on Local Government Efficiency

The Empire Page, an online news source covering state government, has developed a section called “[Improving New York](#).” The page provides a forum for discussion on how to improve various aspects of state and local government. Interviews on local efficiency and shared services are in progress, and among those interviewed are [Stan Lundine](#) (former Chair of the Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness), [Dr. Gerald Benjamin](#) (local government scholar and former LGEC member), and [John Clarkson](#) (LGEC Executive Director).

Special District Accountability

Increased accountability for commissioner-run special districts will result from a new law proposed by the State Comptroller and the Nassau County Executive. New requirements for these districts, which are primarily located on Long Island, include:

- Public hearings on proposed budgets before submitting them to the town.
- Budget estimates must be posted on both the town and special district websites (if they exist). Websites must also post annual financial reports of the special district, special district election notices, and public notices and audit reports.

More information on this new law is available [here](#).

State and Local Highway Service Partnership

Improvements in statutes governing how state and local highway services operate now clearly authorize the State Department of Transportation to contract with municipalities to provide fuel, equipment, machinery, repair and supplies for the municipality. The new

law (Chapter 165) gives broader authority to state agencies to contract with local governments, and was sponsored by Senator George Winner and Assemblyman David Koon. This helps achieve a Commission recommendation that greater cooperation between the state and localities be permitted for routine highway maintenance, snow and ice conditions, and under emergency conditions.

Indiana Voters Approve Moving Assessing to County Level

Earlier this year the Indiana Legislature passed legislation moving the responsibility to assess property from township assessors to county assessors in 965 of the state's 1,008 townships. In the remaining large townships referendums were held to decide whether to move assessing to the county level. This month, voters in Indiana supported the elimination of 29 of 43 township assessors. State and Local chambers of commerce campaigned in favor of the change.

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