



## To the Citizens of New York State

People are demanding change at all levels of government. They are frustrated by a local tax burden that is the highest in the nation. They value their communities, but want modern, efficient services at an affordable price.

Our Commission was launched with the conviction that New Yorkers are living under a very outdated local government structure. The vast majority of our municipalities were established and their boundaries set during the horse-and-buggy era. There are also outdated laws and offices for which no modern rationale exists. Over the years we have added to this outdated system, but rarely simplified, and today we have nearly 5,000 local government entities.

Substantial savings are available if we choose to modernize. Over the past year, this basic truth has been confirmed again and again in testimony, and in the 200 initiatives for change brought forward by local leaders. Because we believe that top-down reform seldom works, we sought from the beginning to learn from a process of assisting local initiatives and addressing barriers encountered. This must be an ongoing effort at the state level, because we need to better enable, assist, and promote successful practices.

Shared services are one way to bring efficiencies to local governments, including school districts, and we have recommended enhancements in state assistance, support and funding for these activities. However, consolidation of services or even governmental entities may be needed in some areas. Both shared services and consolidation face many hurdles. It is always harder to change than to hold to the status quo. But with the economic challenges New York faces, doing nothing is no longer an acceptable answer. We need to find ways to tip the balance in favor of efficiency.

This Commission was charged with examining *local* government, and our report focuses on ways to make counties, municipalities, schools and other local entities more affordable, accountable, democratic, and competitive. That does not imply, however, that the problems are solely or even primarily caused by local leaders. Our proposals address mandates and other cost-drivers. State government creates the rules under which local governments and schools operate – rules which can stand in the way of efficient and effective operations.

Our suggestions for change are presented with a mix of optimism and concern, because past local government reform commissions have issued reports that were not implemented. However, we are hopeful that with the emphasis on locally generated ideas, this effort will achieve significant success. Most of our recommendations are designed to encourage or enable change, rather than to mandate it. Few would argue with the proposition that we cannot continue on the path we are on.

We want to encourage local leaders to be bold. It is our view that big changes are necessary, although many will be difficult to achieve. With these recommendations, and a lot of hard work at all levels of government, we can adapt our best tradition – local democracy – to a 21st century model.

Stan Lundine, Chair