

NYS Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness

Re: CONSOLIDATION OF SERVICES

Consolidation of services is nothing new; in the past it was simply called “regionalizing” a term that apparently needed to be updated to make regionalizing sound more appealing.

It matters little what term or phrase one uses to describe the encroachments on Home Rule and loss of the ability to hold ones local officials responsible for their actions, the result is the same, a distancing of government from the electors.

The consolidation of services movement seems to be championed by two groups of people.

The first being those who believe that they have an obligation as social planners to form a more perfect world in their minds eye for the rest of us to live in, irregardless of whether it is a fashion we wish to live in.

The second group being one that believes that only centralized government can rule with fairness and efficiency. I firmly believe that for reasons known only to them they choose to disregard the failure of every global experience associated with centralized government.

We do not have to look beyond our own borders to find the failures of centralized government. In fact we do not have to look beyond our own state to see what would lie ahead of us by consolidating local governments. Or have many of us held a deaf ear to forever on going battles between regions within our own state—upstate versa downstate.

I will admit that the battles of regions on a state level are much more grand than on a local level and perhaps it is difficult to measure the direct loss to one region over another at such a level, but is not true at a local level.

An example of loss at a local level would be: the shared use of heavy equipment by adjoining towns.

I have heard it said on more than one occasion that it makes little sense for every small town to own their own road graders and other heavy equipment. After all a grader cost \$250,000.00 why should we spend that money on something that is used so little? The reason being it is money well spent!

My reasoning behind the money being well spent is founded in a few very simple facts:

- Most heavy equipment has a lifecycle of 20 or more years
- Most rural small towns roadways are gravel. Those gravel roadways need to be recrowned twice a year for water runoff. There are times when the roadway material is in a state that allows for the most efficient regarding. It should be assumed that if one town's roadbed were in a state for the most efficient grading that the adjoining town's roadbed would also be in the same state—who gets to use the grader?
- Emergency management. This is something that is overlooked by regional and state governments but a close examination of FEMA claims by the towns would give you some insight. As I'm writing this response the local news channel and the weather service is notifying me of pending severe weather and is issuing a warning with the possibility of four inches of rain and damaging winds. This type of weather event is not new to my town of Canaan and we have suffered from roadbed washout from lesser storms and the FEMA claims will support that statement. Our response and recovery to like past events has been outstanding. This is attributed to two factors—1) outstanding town highway employees and Superintendent of Highways. 2) the ability to respond with the necessary equipment to deal with the damage caused by the flooding and winds.

When I hear the calls for consolidation of local service as a cost savings measure the issues becomes more perplexing to me. Could it be that no one has taken the time to investigate the staffing of the local highway departments? Speaking from my knowledge

of the Canaan Highway Department and the surrounding towns I fail to see where there would be any real gain in cost savings.

The town has four employees and a working Highway Superintendent (who is elected) and one part-time clerk. For the sake of argument lets say the Canaan Highway Department was forced to merge with an adjacent town and let us further say that Canaan residents vote yes on a mandatory referendum to eliminate the Superintendent's position, what would the fiscal impact be?

There would be a duplication of services on the part on the highway clerk so that position would be eliminated, small savings. And I doubt that there would be a savings at all, for the workload of the remaining clerk would increase. That increase would mean more hours and moving the position to fulltime thereby increasing the funding for the clerks position and the funding for increased benefits not presently enjoyed by a part-time clerk.

The Highway Superintendent position would be eliminated also but I would argue that the elimination of that position would cause a budget increase. Remember that position is a working position and would need to be replaced by a like increase in the working class positions. Also that newly created highway worker position to replace the Highway Superintendent's would now be eligible for overtime and other contractual, or Town Board agreed benefits afforded only to the general highway workers.

Sharing of services/interagency cooperation agreements

No discussion of sharing of service or interagency cooperation should be undertaken without acknowledging what already exist.

The ability of local governments to take advantage of New York State contract bids to increase the buying power of local governments is a very powerful tool at the disposal of County and Town Government.

The use of cooperative use agreement of equipment between towns and county has been a very successful and longstanding program. As successful as cooperative use agreements are, due note should be made of their limitations. At times it is very difficult to agree on scheduling of dates and times of use of the equipment and necessary manpower to operate the equipment.

Regional planning/economic development/tourism

Much of what I've been hearing from government is the need to strip the local governments of Home Rule—that my town, my life style that I now enjoy and one that I have a say in, needs to be given to a much wiser authority who knows better what I need than me. And to that end I just say, NO thank you!

I am not saying no, without good cause, nor am I'm saying no just because I fear change may not be for the better. I am saying no because of the past performance and blunders in my opinion of government at a level higher than the local level. Yes, I will admit that government at the local level has not performed at a level that has always pleased me, but the impact of my displeasure can be quickly directed with the possibility of some sort of corrective action be it by the Town Board or at the ballot box. This is not the case with some well-insulated regional agency responsible only to the political appointing body and not the electorate.

The consolidation of services movement is promoting they know best how to reduce my tax burden and that the town tax is the culprit, that it is the sole cause, or leading cause, for my overtaxed status as a New York resident.

The simple and overlooked fact by the movement is that my Town tax is the smallest property tax burden I shoulder. I believe even a casual look at the cost of the town tax to the taxpayer would reveal that it is a much smaller percentage of the total bill than School or County tax.

This brings me to question if you honestly believe that consolidation of services is a means of lowering my tax bill then why would you not suggest that it be applied to those areas that comprise the largest portion of my property tax burden---school and county. In fact if we applied the same cost saving principle to the state level of government we could create two (2) regions, upstate and downstate, just think of the savings that consolidation would bring about.

I would also ask has the committee considered redistricting the state into two districts, consolidation at this level would allow us to reduce the legislative bodies to two members, that would be a real cost savings. And if we were to apply the same principles to states we could consolidate the Mid-Atlantic States into one state. To the creative mind the call for efficiency through consolidation leads us to endless possibilities.

Now is the time to just say no to this program and to say no to the strong-arm actions that are being proposed to force local government to agree to give up their rights to Home Rule.

In closing, I direct your attention to one of the statements given in support of consolidation “we have to much government”. That is one statement involved within this issue that I can agree with. There is too much government, but not at the lowest level, the Town; the excess is clearly at state level.

Respectfully yours,

J. Pierre Gontier