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Sharing for good of the taxpayers: Governor's push, local examples of cost-saving moves warrant closer study by all governments.

Utter the words shared services in front of public officials and they're apt to applaud the concept or shudder at it. Say the phrase to residents of a community and their reaction is likely to be much the same.

Shared services can be perceived as either a cost-savings godsend or a political stink bomb. It all depends on perspective and facts.

New York's Gov. Eliot Spitzer stands in the former camp, and despite a recent scandal that has distracted attention on the governor's agenda, Spitzer is absolutely doing the right thing by making shared services a key part of his first term in office.

It is a concept that has long caught the attention of officials in Chemung County, though with mixed results. But there are enough successes in the books to justify continued efforts to coax parochial local governments into combining forces, maintaining quality services and lowering costs — or at least keeping them in check.

Sometimes attempts are virtually effortless, such as the decision this year by the town of Southport to turn over its police enforcement to the Chemung County Sheriff's Department. At other times, such attempts are flatly rejected, which was the case when West Elmira officials, facing strong objections from residents, backed off a similar arrangement between their police department and the sheriff's office.

Despite the setbacks, though, officials need to keep exploring ways to cross government boundaries to maintain a level of services that don't continue to bloat New Yorkers' local tax bills.

One such move worth duplicating is the creation of a shared highway program involving the county, four towns and a village that County Executive Tom Santulli put forth in 2006. Not every municipality joined, and that's fine, says Gerald Benjamin, a professor at SUNY New Paltz who praised the Chemung County highway initiative.

"The road program is an excellent example," he said. "I like the idea of going ahead with those willing to go along." In fact, the county's shared highway services proposal is a featured case study on the New York Department of State's Web site.

Benjamin is among a cadre of New York government experts who have long clamored for reforms that would streamline efficiency and save money. **Robert Ward, deputy director of the Rockefeller Institute in Albany, is among those who, like Benjamin, sees huge advantages in shared services but also much reluctance among officials to take the plunge.**

Ward, who served on one of the governor's shared services advisory committees, pointed to a resounding success in the Albany area when four counties jointly built a regional youth detention center in Colonie about 10 years ago. But he also has seen sharing attempts fall through, such as one between the town of Berne and Albany County.

"It's the kind of thing that makes those of us for good government bang our heads against the wall," Ward said.

In Chemung County, officials have a chance to avoid that head banging and be responsible with taxpayers' money by remaining open-minded to shared services studies and seeking state money to study new and cheaper ways to deliver services.

Whether it's as complex as combining city and county administrative functions or merging Southport's one-officer police department with the county, the willingness to break from the past is almost as critical as the savings.

Shared services are not a panacea for all government spending, but they can offer smart alternatives

to the expensive status quo. Spitzer wisely has recognized that potential and wants a shared services mindset to be part of the governing culture in the state. Local officials who don't buy into that same thinking are shortchanging their taxpayers and making New York a more expensive place to live.