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New York's Surplus Governments

By Robert B. Ward

NEW Yorkers love to complain. Taxes, the schools, traffic, you name it. But count your blessings, residents of the five boroughs: At least you know whom to complain to.

Pity the folks who live in the suburbs or upstate. There, no one in local government is really in charge. And thus, no one is fully accountable for delivering good public services at an affordable cost.

Mayor Ed Koch used to ask: "How'm I doin'?" That was the right question — because New York's mayor is actually in charge of things.

Have an opinion about crime? One official deserves the lion's share of credit or blame: the mayor. Think your local taxes are too high? Again, talk to the mayor.

The same is true whether your issue is clean streets, nice parks, good schools or development. Sure, the City Council plays a role. But by far, the most important decider in New York City is one person: Mayor Bloomberg.

By contrast, in most of the Empire State, voters elect a county executive to oversee services such as welfare and public health. Separately, they elect a county sheriff to run road patrols and the local jail.

Besides living in a county, everyone lives in a city or a town, with another chief elected executive. And outside the state's five biggest cities a separate layer of government — the school district — is in charge of local education.

Some 1.9 million New Yorkers have yet a fourth local government — a village. They vote for two chief executives: A supervisor for the town, and a mayor for the village.

Think of it this way: If you live outside New York City, at least three local-government entities (perhaps as many as six) charge you property taxes. That makes it hard to hold any of them, or any one person, accountable for results.

And all that duplication is one reason property taxes in the Empire State are among the highest in the country.

A recent study by the Rockefeller Institute's Don Boyd found that New York's local governments are among the most heavily "layered" in the country. Typically, other states skip on either county or town government, or don't include cities under county governments. In another state, for instance, Yonkers wouldn't be part of Westchester County - the city would run social programs and other services itself.

All this duplication results from more than two centuries of government by accretion. No one planned it this way. But the question remains: Why don't leaders in Albany do something about it?

A high-level commission chaired by former Lt. Gov. Stan Lundine is proposing 30 important steps that Gov. Paterson, our state legislators and local leaders can take to streamline local governments and make them more cost-effective.

Ideally, we'd eliminate layers of government (such as towns or villages) entirely. But most voters don't see the benefits of such a move, so elected leaders don't push for it. And the reality is that when school districts or other bureaucracies merge, employee union contracts tend to "level up" - resulting in higher costs rather than savings.

Still, common-sense reforms are available. For example, Ulster County recently spent \$100 million on a new jail, while nearby Dutchess County is spending \$70 million. Under current state guidelines

and practices, it's virtually impossible for two counties to manage their costs by sharing a correctional facility. The Lundine commission recommends repeal of the state law that gets in the way.

And the commission goes beyond restructuring proposals to recommend steps that would directly save hundreds of millions of dollars. Most important

on that list: curbing the rising cost of health and pension benefits.

New York's municipal structures reflect their origins in the late 1700s and early 1800s. With a real push from today's leaders, we can finally move government forward - if not into the 21st century, perhaps at least the 20th.