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New York's local governments need to join current century

By Robert Ward

We're well into the 21st century now.

You don't have to look any further than your personal computer, cell phone, GPS system or even the fancy weather report on TV to see the indicators of how things have changed. At least one thing hasn't changed, though. That's the old, creaky structure of local governments in New York. In many ways, the organization and operations of our counties, cities, towns, villages and school districts represent the thinking of two centuries ago.

Our former lieutenant governor, Stan Lundine, and other members of a special state commission want to do something about that. The Lundine Commission, officially known as the New York State Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness, has just issued a report with major recommendations that could make local governments and schools work better — and save hundreds of millions of tax dollars at the same time.

“The vast majority of our municipalities were established and their boundaries set during the horse-and-buggy era,” Lundine wrote in the report.

As a result, we see things such as a county snowplow lifting its blade off the pavement when traveling a town highway.

We see tiny police departments in villages that could rely instead on a town police department, or a county sheriff's office, or the State Police. Within just a few miles, we see costly duplication of local assessors' offices, tax collectors' offices, emergency dispatchers and municipal justice courts. The net result of all those things, and other overlapping gov-

ernmental units: Our property tax bills are among the highest in the nation, and rising every year.

If you live anywhere in the Empire State outside New York City, you have at least three general-purpose local government units that collect property taxes, and perhaps four: the county, your city or town, school district, and perhaps a village. (You may also pay property taxes to a local library district or fire district.) That's not the case in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, or most other states.

Either they don't separate school districts from the local municipality, or they have counties or towns, but not both. Inevitably, New York's overlapping system of more than 3,200 local taxing jurisdictions drives up costs - for no benefit.

In addition to Lundine, the commission members included experts such as state Sen. Elizabeth O'C. Little, a consistent champion of local-government reform and restructuring.

The commission proposed 30 important steps that Gov. David Paterson, the Legislature, and local leaders can take to streamline local governments and make them more cost-effective.

For example, counties across the state have been ordered by the state Commission of Correction to build new county jails or expand existing facilities. Ulster County has spent \$100 million on a new jail, and neighboring Dutchess County is spending \$70 million on another one. Under current state guidelines and practices, it's almost impossible for two counties to manage their costs better by sharing a correctional facility. The Commission recommends repeal of a state law that requires every county to maintain its own jail. Sure seems to make sense.

The Commission says employee benefits such as health insurance and pensions are major drivers of annual property tax increases. While costs are increasing dramatically, more than half of local governments and many school districts do not require employees to make any contribution for individual coverage.

Private-sector employers overwhelmingly require some employee contribution, and the Commission urges the public sector to do the same. It recommends that localities and school districts require at least a 10 percent employee share for individual coverage, and 25 percent for family coverage.

That's what most New York state employees pay, but still less than the nationwide average for all workers. With rising disparities between the benefits that public-sector workers enjoy, and those in the pri-

vate sector, some contribution by local government employees seems fair.

As the Lundine Commission wrote in its report, "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."

Streamlining local governments in New York, reducing costs, and bringing them even into the 20th century won't be easy. But who knows? With leadership in Albany, and in localities around the state, maybe we'll make enough progress that someday we can think about local governments approaching the 21st century.

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