

Pattern for Progress, SUNY and Pace tackle municipal consolidation

BY DYLAN SKRILOFF

It's a growing trend in New York governance - the consolidation of local and municipal services into larger, more efficient units. The desired result, proponents say, is to decrease property taxes through increased efficiency and cooperation. On October 5 Pattern for Progress dedicated its fall conference to the topic, teaming up with SUNY New Paltz's brand new Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach (CRREO) and Pace University to present the event.

Over 200 regional leaders, politicians and business people gathered in the Student Union at SUNY New Paltz to attend the event, which in all ran from 8am to 3:15pm. Keynote speaker Richard Briffault, professor at Columbia University Law School, New York Secretary of State Lorraine Cortes-Vazquez, Pattern President and CEO Jonathan Drapkin and SUNY New Paltz's Director of the CRREO Gerald Benjamin were among those who spoke at the event.

Governor Spitzer's official stand on streamlining local government is "together, we must summon the political will to face the reality that 4,200 taxing jurisdictions are simply too many, too expensive and too burdensome." In addition to counties, cities, towns and villages there are also school districts, fire districts, water districts, local authorities and other government entities that require taxation. In a recent joint article penned by Drapkin and Benjamin they refer to the local governmental apparatus as a "web - it can hardly be called a system - ill-suited to 21st century conditions." They noted that the current web's political foundations date back to an age when there was no telephones or automobile transportation.

Keynote speaker Briffault said though, the political will did not exist at a grassroots level in New York State for wholesale reform and reorganization of the system, due to voters attachment to their local identities. There is still much the state can do to facilitate change, he said. "There is a need for a greater state role. The state has the institutional capacity to take the lead in promoting agreements and the legal experience to design and protect agreements." Another idea Briffault floated was to empower the state's many counties to take a lead in the matter.

In April, three months into Governor Spitzer's term in office, he created the Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness and appointed Drapkin to the group. Drapkin said Pattern's role in the project would be to facilitate research and cooperation. SUNY New Paltz, Pace University and other institutions of higher education will conduct detailed research on the matter as well.



Left to right, John Traylor from the Office of NYS Comptroller, Kyle Wilber, NYS Department of State, and Gerald Benjamin, SUNY New Paltz.

Secretary of State Cortes-Vazquez said to help the cause her department has been given a \$25,000,000 budget for Municipal Services Incentive Grant Program. She said the state's leadership is focused on helping local governments consolidate. "The governor made it clear early on, the importance of streamlining local government. This is the direction the state has to go in - local government efficiency. Local taxes are disproportionate and out of control," she said. New York State's high taxes, the highest in the nation, does not come from the Albany system so much as it comes from local government system, she stated.

New York's Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness initiative has already attracted over 150 consolidation initiatives by local governments. Some of the services that have been considered for consolidation are highway services, employee health insurance, property assessment, administration, water/sewer/stormwater systems, justice courts, code enforcement, tax collection, emergency dispatch, technology, policing, economic development agencies and investment. They also have a website www.nyslocalgov.org, where all those projects ongoing are listed.

Phil Marino, Town Supervisor of Stony Point in Rockland County, told the Hudson Valley Business Journal that the conference caused him to start brainstorming. "Stony Point is unique because there are no villages in it, but that doesn't stop me from wondering if there is a way I could collaborate with other towns. I am also wondering if one countywide health plan for all public employees is possible," he said. Marino then had the opportunity to attend workshops that assisted public officials in writing grant assistance requests to the New York Department of State.