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## Editorial: Towns feel pressures to start sharing more

Governments share when they can deliver services their constituents request at a lower cost, creating the opportunity to reduce taxes or provide additional services without raising taxes.

Sometimes, governments refuse to share even though they know they are spending more than they need to.

The state has long been in the business of nudging local governments toward sharing, providing millions of dollars to fund studies to calculate potential savings, coming up with supplements that help bridge the gap as organizational charts change shape.

As a story in the Times Herald-Record on Sunday showed, "A 2008 report compiled for the state Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness estimated that state and local initiatives, such as sharing services and consolidating school districts, courts and police departments, could save between \$900 million and \$1.1 billion."

Yet as the story also reported, in Chester, "a proposal to merge town and village police departments met with stiff opposition, despite one study showing the estimated savings to be about \$418,000."

The Chesters do not have trouble with other shared services, such as a recreation department or joint sewer district. The Chesters, along with the towns of Goshen and Wawayanda and, just recently, the Town of Newburgh, no longer entrust the often controversial job of assessing property to local employees, having all signed contracts to have employees of Orange County do it instead.

While there is little opposition to consolidation in some areas, others have shown a stubborn resistance to both the bottom line and pressure from the top.

As Gerald Benjamin, director of SUNY New Paltz's Benjamin Center and a longtime proponent of sharing services, explains, "People want to maintain their local jurisdictions, they want to maintain their control ... but they want to get economies."

Small school districts that can calculate the efficiency and savings in a merger as well as the opportunity that such a move offers to their students have a tough time overcoming local sentiment. Alumni who identify with their school do not want it to disappear. Communities that center around a school building or campus do not want to lose that sense of identity or the added financial benefits that come from so much activity.

Local sentiments also affect police merger talk. Nobody wants to tell members of the local force that they are not needed or that the job they now do can somehow be done just as well, if not better, under a new management structure.

It's one thing to say we don't need all those road workers or all those clerks. Nobody wants to go on record saying we don't need all those cops.

Yet the Town of Tuxedo is rapidly going in that direction, forced by a drastic shortfall in funds and inept accounting, to lay off officers and dispatchers rather than raise taxes by almost a third.

As others struggle with the limits imposed by the state tax cap, the other side of that coin from Albany, the incentives to study shared services and then to actually share them, will shine more brightly and more municipalities will find that they can no longer afford the old ways of doing business.

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