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Collaboration leads to savings

Streamlining and sharing services benefits taxpayers

By Jordan Carleo-Evangelist
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Albany

Twenty-nine local governments in Albany County will save a combined \$15.8 million annually between 2017 and 2019 thanks to their efforts to streamline government and share services, according to a report released Thursday.

As a result, taxpayers in those communities can expect at least \$2.5 million in tax rebates next year under Gov. Andrew Cuomo's so-called tax freeze program, said County Comptroller Michael Connors, whose office oversaw the study.

Under the tax freeze, the state has pledged to rebate homeowners for modest property tax increases if their local governments stay within the state cap on property tax growth and can demonstrate they have made efforts to save

money by cooperating more closely.

Cuomo championed that plan last year to pressure local leaders to more comprehensively approach cutting the costs of government, making their voters' tax breaks contingent on them.

But the report — which was compiled with the help of Professor Gerald Benjamin of SUNY New Paltz's Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach — says municipalities in the county already had "a long history of sharing services" to control property tax growth.

"We have done more than our part for a very long time," said Altamont Mayor James Gaughan, adding that his village's savings, which include sharing a building inspector with the village of Voorheesville, were 30 times the threshold required by the state.

The biggest chunk of savings — some \$3.1 million — comes from reforms at the Albany County Nursing Home, followed by an estimated \$1.6 million in annual savings by merging the maintenance staff in Bethlehem's highway and parks departments.

Colonie had \$1.8 million in savings in personnel costs by privatizing the operations of its landfill, while the report books a \$900,000 savings for the consolidation of emergency dispatch services of Coeymans, Cohoes, Green Island, and Watervliet under the county sheriff's office.

Including larger cities and towns will likely require state aid said Bethlehem Supervisor John Clarkson.





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Benjamin called on state leaders to "take down legislation that gets in the way of common sense" efforts to save money through shared services.

One example cited in the report is a state comptroller's interpretation of a provision of the state tax cap law that, the report contends, actually penalizes municipalities for saving money by transferring functions to other local governments.

Connors praised the ability of local leaders to leave their "egos at the door."

All three of the county's cities, its six villages and nine of its 10 towns participated in the study. Only the town of Green Island did not participate because it doesn't have its own tax levy and its borders are co-terminus with the village of Green Island, the report said. Ten library and fire districts also participated.

Albany Treasurer [Darius Shahinfar](#) said changing the conversation from consolidating governments to collaborating to save money has helped improve local buy-in.

"People were not necessarily sold on dissolving their local governments," Shahinfar said. "But now they're starting to demand that we work together to solve these problems."

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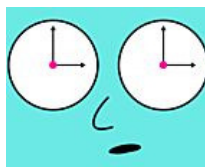
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