Pattern for Progress, SUNY and Pace tackle municipal consolidation

BY DYLAN SKRILLOFF

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 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.