



Tax conversation has finally started

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Whenever a newspaper publishes photographs of unsmiling property owners in front of their homes, tax bills clenched in hand, it is a sure bet that the accompanying article does not impart good news. True to form are the Sunday Journal News articles about New York property owners and their super-sized tax bills. A Rye Brook man pays about \$20,000 a year; an Ossining owner pays \$12,000; a New City man pays nearly \$14,000, and so on. A fair question: How come their pitchforks aren't in the pictures, too?

It seems that taxpayers everywhere are mad enough to take up pitchforks, or worse in some local communities, judging from recent unrest, including the Tea Party rallies held nationwide and locally on Tax Day, which was Thursday. A more buttoned-down local gathering — a "Call to Action" by the business/civic-minded Westchester County Association — drove home the same message: fix New York's tax mess. "We're not a bunch of fringe people," said William Mooney, the WCA president, who has been pushing government reform for years. "We're trying to protect our community is what we're trying to do."

Crises force talk

Inspired by crises, the tax rallies and other public demonstrations are part of along-overdue conversation about the form, structure and duties of government in the Lower Hudson Valley, where so many taxpayers are at their taxing limit. The conversation includes the spirited debate over tax-cutting and government-downsizing; it also includes passionate discussion about a trickier calculus — what should constitute a reasonable social "safety net" in our communities? What government services do people really need? These aren't facile discussions.

Last week, the Editorial Board hosted a forum with social service advocates and providers concerned about the toll of budget cuts on the neediest among us; they raised

important concerns about the real cost of government cutbacks — such as how some cuts would lead to more expensive problems down the road, including more homelessness. In another forum, at the County Center in White Plains, Bee-Line bus riders turned out in large numbers to protest government cuts that would hit home — the proposed elimination of express bus service between Westchester and Manhattan.

Votes over pitchforks

On perhaps the other end of the spectrum, the Editorial Board also heard from Bob Bondi, the Putnam County executive, who is on a "listening tour" of Putnam that aims to ascertain how residents would redesign local government if given the opportunity to start fresh. Clearly the aim of such an undertaking is to reduce the size of government, not to expand it. Bondi's "listening tour" is one that needs to reach all of the Lower Hudson Valley, where there are too many taxing authorities to count. But likelihood for success is not high; not long ago, a smart plan to streamline tax-assessor services in Putnam failed to gain any traction. Imagine the resistance if someone suggested eliminating a town or village.

But at least these conversations are taking place — before school boards, town boards, editorial boards, wherever policy-makers, taxpayers and voters gather. They haven't always — or not in any sustained or concerted way. (No wonder that Albany especially has been so unresponsive.) Collectively, more people are asking questions, demanding accountability, no longer accepting the unsatisfying status quo. Doubtless in this election year, the conversation will continue all the way to the ballot box. Some things, such as voting, carry far more force— and influence — than even pitchforks.