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Government

More Talk of Sharing Services

By ELSA BRENNER

FROM 1995 to 2005, total property taxes in Westchester increased by 67 percent while the county's population grew by less than 5 percent. Numbers like that have led the Tax Foundation, an organization based in Washington that favors lower taxes, to rank Westchester as one of the top three counties with the highest tax burdens in the country.

Those numbers have also prompted the Westchester County Association, which represents the county's business community, to issue recommendations for tax reform. The organization, which is based in White Plains, has trained its magnifying glass on elementary and secondary public education, county government, municipal and other taxing entities, and tax administration and valuation.

The ever-increasing tax burden has also prompted the town of Greenburgh and the village of Dobbs Ferry to consider sharing some police services.

Linda G. Cooper, Ossining's village manager, said the concept of shared services was not a new one to the town of Ossining and the village, which, among other things, have had one town clerk serving both governments for at least a decade. The two municipal entities are now studying the feasibility of sharing other services or even merging their public works and police departments.

Statewide, the shared-services movement has gained momentum in recent years. In April, Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#) established a commission to investigate ways to create partnerships among local governments and report its findings in the spring.

In Nassau County, efforts to streamline government are well under way, said Howard S. Weitzman, the county's comptroller. After a series of audits three years ago, he said, the county found "excessive amounts of waste" and overlapping of services from the many separate sewer, water and sanitation districts. The county is making recommendations to Governor Spitzer's Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness.

Suffolk County, among several cost-saving proposals, is considering one that would establish a single health insurance plan for county workers. [Steve Levy](#), the county executive, said such a plan could eventually be expanded to include local municipalities and the county's 69 school districts. Suffolk is also studying the feasibility of having the county and municipalities coordinate road construction and transportation planning.

In Westchester, systems for billing taxes and recording assessments are technologically archaic and should be simplified, said Alfred B. DelBello, a former county executive and state lieutenant governor who is chairman of the County Association's Property Tax Reform Commission and also a member of Governor Spitzer's commission on government efficiency.

"A surprising amount of the paperwork is still being entered in ledger books and buff cards," Mr. DelBello said.

"We really only need one system countywide, which could send a single tax bill to the property owner," he said. "Banks can do this kind of thing in two minutes. Our technological capabilities are extreme, but most governments have not caught up with it."

Another domain ripe for shared services, Mr. DelBello said, is the maintenance of village, county, state and federal parks and roads in Westchester.

William M. Mooney Jr., president of the County Association, testified Wednesday at a hearing of the state commission in Bear Mountain about the negative effect of Westchester's high property taxes on economic development. "Without getting the property tax burden under control, Westchester's ability to attract and retain businesses is seriously threatened," he said in a statement issued before his testimony.

The County Association's commission is not considering consolidation of local governments, Mr. DelBello said. "For political and other reasons," he said, "it's not appropriate in Westchester to dissolve any layers of government, although New York has more government entities than any other state."

"We're trying to solve these problems with a scalpel and not a sledgehammer," Mr. DelBello said. "Particularly when it comes to villages, residents have strong identities."

The kind of shared services plan under consideration in Dobbs Ferry and Greenburgh is an example of how municipalities can work together to lessen the tax burden on residents in both communities, Mr. DelBello said, reiterating that such proposals are not about eliminating jurisdictions but about finding constructive ways to reduce redundancies.

Toward that end, Greenburgh and Dobbs Ferry are applying for a \$100,000 state grant to study the feasibility of sharing personnel within their police departments. The

Department of State administers grants — \$25 million is allocated this year — to find tax savings and efficiencies through a variety of methods, including shared programs, cooperative agreements, mergers and consolidations. Grants have gone to proposals to investigate shared sewer, building and highway maintenance as well as police and other services, according to Eamon Moynihan, a spokesman for the Department of State.

In addition to the unincorporated area of Greenburgh, the town includes six incorporated villages, each with its own government, emergency protection and other services. Last month, Paul J. Feiner, Greenburgh's supervisor, proposed a nearly \$61 million town budget that would raise taxes in the unincorporated areas of the municipality, on average, by \$413, or 23 percent, to \$2,205 for a \$600,000 home assessed at \$15,000, said Edye McCarthy, the town's assessor. Under a separate budget for the incorporated area, villagers would see a 5 percent tax increase.

To avoid the ever-escalating burden to property owners, Mr. Feiner said, he is looking for ways to cut costs. Toward that end, he is backing a first-step proposal to have Greenburgh's police force handle overnight dispatching for Dobbs Ferry, freeing an officer there for other services.

At the least, said John A. Kapica, Greenburgh's police chief, such a move could mean a savings of \$125,000 in direct annual pay, and 25 percent more in savings from the elimination of employee benefits.

"Of course, if there would be a full-blown merger between the two departments, the savings would be even more significant," Chief Kapica said. "But we expect there would be a series of intermediate steps and intermediate savings."

This fall, Dobbs Ferry investigated a similar plan with the neighboring village of Irvington, but the proposal fell through, in part because of concerns that Irvington would lose community police coverage and also that the benefits of shared services would not outweigh the effort, said Lawrence S. Schopfer, the village's administrator. Chief Kapica pointed out that, in general, "people are afraid of the unknown and of what change might bring."

But the flip side, Mr. Feiner said, is "the fear of ever-increasing taxes."

"The climate is ready for more sharing," he said. "People have had it with the constant tax hikes and all the waste and duplication. My fear is that people are going to start voting with their feet, and they're going to leave Westchester altogether."