



Tax-battered New Yorkers look to government consolidation

Joseph Spector • Journal Albany bureau • July 25, 2010

ALBANY — In New York, it isn't hard to find a government that can levy taxes.

There are 62 counties, 62 cities, 553 villages, 698 school districts and 932 towns. And then the whopper: 6,927 special districts that include local lighting, sewer, fire, water and drainage districts.

Add them up and there are 10,092 entities in New York outside New York City that can tax residents. And that number, from the state Attorney General's Office, is just a best estimate. There could be many more, state officials warn.

Even states that rival New York for the highest property taxes in the nation, such as New Jersey, can't come close to the number of taxing authorities in the Empire State. New Jersey has about 1,700 governments; neighboring Pennsylvania has about 3,100.

In New York state, Ulster and Dutchess counties rank 12th and 13th, respectively, in terms of the number of property taxing entities. Dutchess has 189 taxing districts, while Ulster has 196.

Frustration with high taxes in New York is fueling a revived and spirited push to dissolve governments, particularly villages, and residents are armed with a new law that makes it much easier to do so through a referendum.

But the law, which took effect in March and was drafted by Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, now the Democratic nominee for governor, is being criticized in many local communities, and some state lawmakers want it changed.

Opponents say the law allows for a handful of people, even those who don't live in the community, to push for a quick dissolution vote before it's clear whether there's a cost savings.

Before, signatures from 33 percent of the electorate

were needed to hold a referendum; now it's 10 percent.

"It's changed the game in terms of emboldening people to want to force that discussion to occur. But it's changed the game in another way: It's making people vote without having a plan in place," said Charles Zettek, a researcher at the Rochester-based Center for Governmental Research, which studies dissolutions.

The failure of a dissolution vote in the Village of Brockport, Monroe County, in June — the first under the new law — was attributed in large part to a lack of specifics on whether residents would ultimately save on their tax bills. Generally, local governments undertake years of study before a vote is taken.

But in a time when voters are increasingly angry with elected leaders, as polls show, and are clamoring for less costly government, the dissolution movement is gaining steam.

Between 1995 and 2009, only one village dissolved, the 1,300-person Village of Andes in Delaware County. Now six, including Seneca Falls, Seneca County, are slated to dissolve into their neighboring towns this year and in 2011.

Advocates said the law puts power back into the hands of residents rather than elected officials, who may cling to the patronage posts that local governments are often criticized for providing.

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