



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

## From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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| ISSUE: **LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

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### **Political Tea Leaves**

Each day, including weekends, I receive emails from the Senate Communications Office that contain news stories from media outlets around the state. The emails cover just about everything that would be of interest to state senators and we're asked to review them to keep abreast of developing issues. I actually kind of enjoy reading most of them. It's like having all the key issues conveniently delivered every morning and it makes my job that much easier.

Most news "trends" come from unplanned events or circumstances. For example, a hurricane will naturally trigger stories for several days on emergency preparedness or our lack of it. But I've been in politics long enough to read other stories and decipher that something's happening behind the scenes, a story behind the story. These seemingly innocuous items are gently spun into the news stream to slowly start beating the drum of support for some upcoming issue or agenda.

Now I might just be reading political tea leaves but I'm feeling a bit uneasy about the sudden appearance of a particular topic. Several large news outlets have started editorializing on the

fiscal woes of various municipalities and local governments and what role our state has in curing them. What's curious is their timing and position. They inexplicably started exploring this on virtually the same day and ruminating on the same "tough choices" these local governments will undoubtedly face.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Local Government, I know full well that many of our cities, towns and villages are struggling. In fact, our recent state budget provided for the state's takeover of Medicaid increases afflicting our counties as well as \$13 million in assistance to help some local governments close their deficits. But anytime I see the media lining up on the same page at the same time, it gives me reason to pause, especially when no one is actually telling us what those "tough choices" are.

I suspect that somewhere in the near future there'll be a big push for the consolidation of local governments. To be clear, I'm in favor of "right-sizing" government and there are numerous circumstances where efficiencies can and should be achieved. What I worry about is that the fervor for consolidation may lead to dissolution of local governments without proper attention to its ramifications.

You'll recall that in 2009, then-Attorney General Cuomo helped pass a law empowering citizens to dissolve local governments. At the time, I was serving as mayor of Mineola and I could see the holes that it left unplugged. It made it possible to eliminate elements of local government without first knowing the impact to the community. Consider, for example, that under the law, a petition to eliminate a fire district could force a referendum vote without anyone ever discussing who would pick up those fire services. While it would seem obvious that we should know this before haphazardly voting to eliminate it, no such provision exists. That's why shortly after taking office, I sponsored a bill (S1824A) to clarify this law to provide, among other things, that residents would have to be presented an alternative plan before anything is eliminated or consolidated. This bill, co-sponsored by Assemblywoman Schimel

in the Assembly, is still winding its way through the legislature.

Simply, I am concerned about efforts that distance people from control of their circumstances. Our ground-level interaction with our own local governments and our ability to hold them accountable has always been fulcrum for getting things done. I oppose any effort to limit that ability by transferring power to a further removed layer of government. In more tangible terms, if your sanitation misses a pick up, I highly doubt an office in Albany would care more than your local mayor or trustees who are also your neighbors.

The larger the government, the less responsive it is and the more layers of bureaucracy necessary to provide services. I might be wrong about any of this even being a pending issue. But I ask you to pay careful attention to the news and what agendas may be represented. In any case, it's worth discussing how we can consolidate services while still protecting the local forms of governments that define our levels of service.