

Albany chief mulls regionalization in lieu of relief

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Disappointed by state lawmakers' failure to provide mandate relief in the recently enacted state budget, local government officials are looking at regionalization as a crutch until relief arrives.

Albany County Executive Michael Hoblock told the New York State Legislative Forum last week that local government has two choices: Manage from crisis to crisis, year to year as infrastructure breaks down — or regionalization.

Regionalization is the consolidation of government functions and services.

Bill Stevens, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Ralph Marino, RC-Muttontown, said the Senate majority has made a number of efforts to streamline government services but is "one of the three players," a reference to the governor and Assembly as the others.

In a press release, Assembly Speaker Saul Weprin, DL-Queens, acknowledged that the new budget "doesn't do enough" to help ease the budget problems of local governments. But he said he wasn't giving up.

The regionalization concept can benefit areas like the capital region, according to Kevin O'Connor, executive director of the Center for Economic Growth. The capital region has approximately 990 units of government.

That's more than one percent of total government operations in the nation, in an area that has less than one half of one percent of the population, said O'Connor.

Edward Farrell, executive director of the New York Conference of Mayors, also supports regionalization, but said it has to be applied on a specific basis. "Some places it will work, some places it won't."

A large number of New York towns and villages already share services. "Regionalization takes that concept one step further," said Farrell.

Ed Crawford, executive director of the New York State Association of Counties said he was disappointed with the Legislature this year and supports any streamlining efforts.

Hoblock defined county governments such as his as "the front line provider" of human services across New York.

Hoblock, a former state assemblyman, criticized state lawmakers who "were patting each other on the back when all they really did was take shifts passing on obligations."

Medicaid is one mandate that Hoblock says really hurts Albany County and last year alone drained 70 percent of the revenue from property taxes.

He said the counties should at least have the flexibility to adapt to the needs of the population.

Stevens said Senate mandate relief proposals during the past two years would have saved local governments \$1 billion. But they lacked Assembly support.

One of those proposals would have required the state to provide funds for any future mandated costs to localities.

Weprin said he is sensitive to the Medicaid burden on local governments and is committed to passing legislation to initiate a phased takeover of local Medicaid costs by the state.

"Enacting a Medicaid takeover law is the ultimate mandate relief," he said.