

## **Shared Services: What Is Their Role in Dobbs Ferry's Future?**

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A striking feature of local government in Westchester County is the number of local jurisdictions that exist in the county, in the form of towns, villages, school districts, sewer districts, fire districts, etc. While most residents enjoy and prefer the benefits of local control over governing bodies that provide for their schools, police and road and sanitation services, the multiple layers of government come with a high price tag.

Local governments are being challenged to keep taxes down yet continue to provide the many services that residents have come to expect in terms of schools, parks, recreation, police, fire, senior citizen programs, to name the most obvious. The high cost of so many local governmental entities has become the target of officials in Albany as the New York State Government has created a task force to encourage the consolidation of local governments and to foster creative solutions to reduce the cost of local government. The need to do so is becoming even more acute as the current real estate driven recession is reducing the non-tax income of local governments amid proposals to impose caps on local property tax increases. Under these circumstances, local governmental officials are well advised to explore ways to streamline government and reduce duplication and redundancy.

One way to reduce the cost of local government is to identify duplicative programs and turn over programs or responsibilities that are already being performed by other government agencies. For example, the Village election voting process, when held in March, incurred a cost that was borne by the Village alone. When held in November, the cost of running the Village elections is picked up by the County Board of Elections, which is already running elections for the town, county, state and national offices. Indeed, Dobbs Ferry's decision to hold elections in November was recognized by the Governor's Office for the cost savings being realized as a result of that change.

The cost of running local government can also be held down by taking advantage of the enhanced purchasing power that comes from combining purchases with other government units. Recently, the Villages of Dobbs Ferry, Hastings-on-Hudson, Irvington, Ardsley, Sleepy Hollow and Elmsford joined with the Town of Greenburgh in the purchase of asphalt for road paving projects, which helped to keep down the price paid by the Villages. Westchester County has a web based service to permit local governments to join with Westchester County in the purchase of goods and supplies to take advantage of volume discounts from common vendors.

A third approach to holding down the cost of local government is for neighboring Villages or jurisdictions to share in the operation of government programs. Dobbs Ferry has been active in this regard, most notably in the provision of certain police programs. Dobbs Ferry has been a participant with the Town of Greenburgh Joint Terrorism Task Force, the Drug and Alcohol Task Force and shares the cost of a Marine Unit river patrol boat with neighboring Hudson River villages.

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Dobbs Ferry has been active over the years in exploring ways to share certain aspects of police services in order to hold down the cost of policing in the Village without sacrificing the high level of protection and professionalism of the Village's Police Department. The cost for Dobbs Ferry's Police Department is approximately \$3.5 million dollars per year, almost 20% of the total Village budget, so it is logical to look for ways to hold down the cost of this budget item.

The first attempt to share services occurred when it was proposed that the Villages of Ardsley and Dobbs Ferry share a night dispatcher to take calls during the usually quiet overnight shift. A strong proponent and advocate for this step was former Dobbs Ferry Police Chief George Longworth. While this step would have provided considerable savings to both villages, opposition in Ardsley prevented the program from going forward.

More recently, in 2007, the Villages of Irvington and Dobbs Ferry commissioned a study to identify areas where the two Villages' police departments could combine administrative and staffing activities to reduce costs without sacrificing services. This analysis, published in July 2007, identified several ways the Villages could combine forces to hold down costs. Two areas were to combine dispatching and the conduct of criminal investigations. The availability of modern communications technology makes possible the consolidation of radio dispatching services in one location to service the two Villages with the other Village providing detective and criminal investigation activities for both Villages. Both steps could result in a net savings overall.

But, once again, opposition in Irvington to even considering such a minimal step, due to the fear of losing control over policing activities in the village, prevented serious consideration of this report's recommendations.

New York State, as part of its effort to encourage local governments to consolidate or combine the delivery of services and acquisitions, now offers grants to help local governments to take steps to reduce overlap and duplication of the delivery of governmental services. According to the State, numerous grants have been issued to local governments, including school districts, towns, villages, counties and others to combine efforts with the goal of reducing duplication and streamlining local government. Towns and villages have teamed up to purchase trucks, snow plows, street sweepers, bucket trucks, and machinery to clean and monitor storm and sanitary sewer systems. The cooperating localities can all use such capital equipment on a shared basis, rather than each entity buying its own equipment to be used on a less than optimum basis. Other grants have been awarded for the purchase of joint fuel storage and dispensing facilities and the merger of police information and dispatching between a city and its county to create a unified dispatch and information system. One grant was awarded to permit neighboring upstate cities and municipalities to form a health insurance consortium to manage costs and provide better quality health benefit programs for municipal employees.

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In other instances, some upstate Villages have obtained funding to study the process of dissolving the local village government and merging with the surrounding town. In other instances, neighboring villages and towns have obtained funding to study the process of abolishing a village police department to permit the local Town and or the State to provide police protection. This was done in Westchester County's Town of Cortlandt, which dissolved the town police department in favor of the Westchester County and New York State Police providing police protection throughout the town.

Shortly after the failure of the effort to consider some sort of cooperation or sharing of police with the Village of Irvington, certain members of the Dobbs Ferry Police Department Union and the Town of Greenburgh's Police Department Union approached then Mayor Joseph Bova and members of the Greenburgh Town Council to explore ways for the two departments to share services or combine efforts in order to save each government some money as well as enable union members to enhance their health insurance coverage by combining the two police forces to create a larger risk pool. Mayor Bova, then Trustees Scott Seskin and David Koenigsberg met with the union representatives and town council members to discuss commissioning such a study. As a result of those informal discussions, the Town and Village jointly applied to New York State and were awarded a grant of over \$75,000 to commission a study to evaluate areas in which the two police departments could share services and or combine forces in some fashion. A request for proposals was recently issued for experts to conduct and prepare the study.

The proposed study will involve an analysis of the functions, staffing and finances of the two departments and governmental entities, as well as the legal aspects for entering into shared municipal services agreements or the combining or merging of portions or all of the departments. The study process will include public hearings and/or meetings to obtain the input of the public in terms of ideas and suggestions for how the two departments could work together to become more streamlined and more efficient. Following the issuance of any such report, the public will be invited to comment and react to any recommendations made by the study. While certain actions, such as sharing services or enhancing cooperation can be implemented by means of action by the Trustees, any more drastic steps such as merger or elimination of a department will, by law, have to be put to a vote via a public referendum.

The purpose of the study is not only to describe the alternatives, but to identify the relative costs of doing nothing, sharing services, merging certain functions and/or merger or dissolution. The goal is to provide the members of the public with as much information as possible so that the citizenry can best decide how they want to pay for police services in the future. In the meantime, the Village government will continue to explore ways to streamline its operations to minimize expenses and hold down taxes but maintain the high level of services and protection we all enjoy.