

## Pressing Policy Issues for Local Governments in New York State

### Introduction

In the summer of 2009 the Center for Local Government at Binghamton University conducted a survey of New York State's chief elected officials. The survey was sent to town supervisors, village and city mayors and the chairs of county governing boards. More information about the survey and survey respondents is included in *2009 Survey of New York's Local Chief Elected Officials: The Details*. This policy brief explores findings on policy issues of importance to local elected officials.

### Pressing Issues for NY Local Governments

Table 1, on page 2, shows the 30 separate issues included in the survey. The survey asked respondents to identify, on a 1 to 4 scale, how pressing the issue is for their municipality. The issues were grouped into six areas: Revenues and Finance, Fees, Procurement, Public Works and Public Safety, Shared Services and Other Items. For 11 of the 30 issues, 50% or more respondents ranked the issue as a pressing issue for their municipality (indicated by a response of 3 or 4 on the four point scale). These 11 items are highlighted in orange in Table 1.

During a serious fiscal downturn it is not surprising that 6 of the 11 most pressing issues were in the Revenue and Finance area. *Need for increases in unrestricted State aid* (72%), *Need for increases in State Highway aid* (80%) and *Concern over access to stimulus package funds* (70%) ranked highest among the six. *The need for reform of property tax administration* (66%) and *assessment* ((50%) both were among the high priority pressing issues.

Two human resource issues ranked among the 11 most pressing issues. *Prevailing wage restrictions for construction projects* (65%) and *Pension costs and rates of increase* (74%) are a serious concern for New York local governments.

The survey results highlighted two areas of policy concern that have been long term issues for local governments. The prevailing wage restrictions noted above, and Wick's Law requirements for

construction projects (62%) are persistent concerns of local government officials.

### Pressing Issues for Counties and Cities

Examining the survey responses by municipal type indicated that some issues were more pressing for counties and cities than for villages and towns. The survey results revealed that 75% of county respondents indicated that the counties' responsibility for pre-school special education programs is a pressing issue. Villages, towns and cities do not carry financial responsibility for these programs and their officials indicate a relatively low level of concern about it.

Both city (50%) and county (75%) survey respondents feel that the exclusion of cellular services from the Utility Gross Receipts Tax is a pressing issue. The legal framework for collective bargaining was identified more strongly as a pressing issue by cities (60%) and counties (50%) than towns (28%) and villages (30%).

### Summary

The policy concerns of local chief elected officials reflect the multiple pressure points they are facing during the current fiscal downturn. Local officials also highlighted a number of more long term policy concerns, including reform in property tax assessment and administration, prevailing wage restrictions for construction projects and Wicks Law reform.

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Policy Concern	Not An Issue				Pressing Issue		Responses greater than 3
	0	1	2	3	4	Refused	
<b>Revenues and Finance</b>							
Distribution of sales tax revenue within the county	21%	9%	12%	24%	29%	6%	53%
Need for increases in unrestricted state aid (Aid and Incentive for Municipalities, or AIM)	7%	3%	17%	33%	39%	1%	72%
Need for increases in state highway aid (CHIPS)	2%	2%	11%	29%	51%	4%	80%
Absence of PILOTs on state owned land	45%	11%	18%	9%	11%	6%	20%
Absence of PILOTs on community residences	41%	12%	17%	9%	9%	13%	18%
The need for reform in the administration of property taxation	10%	9%	13%	20%	46%	2%	66%
The need for reform in the assessment real property	11%	10%	14%	24%	35%	6%	59%
Inability to recoup costs for municipal services provided to tax-exempt properties	16%	12%	21%	23%	27%	2%	50%
Increased use of fund balance to meet operating budget obligations	13%	13%	22%	24%	23%	6%	47%
Declining Property tax base	22%	12%	15%	19%	26%	2%	45%
Concern over access to stimulus package funds	9%	6%	12%	22%	48%	4%	70%
<b>Fees</b>							
Exclusion of cellular services from the Utility Gross Receipts Tax	25%	15%	19%	22%	14%	4%	36%
Inability to impose fees for Volunteer Emergency Rescue and Ambulance Services	42%	16%	18%	11%	12%	1%	23%
State restrictions on where Official Notices can be published	33%	20%	23%	13%	9%	2%	22%
<b>Procurement</b>							
Requiring municipalities to use preferred source vendors	22%	16%	29%	17%	12%	4%	29%
Competitive bidding limits that are set too low on purchasing goods and on construction contracts	16%	13%	25%	23%	22%	2%	45%
Wicks Law requirements for construction projects	15%	7%	12%	17%	45%	4%	62%
<b>Public Works and Public Safety</b>							
Inadequate funding for local water or wastewater infrastructure	21%	6%	10%	16%	45%	2%	61%
Restrictions on local governments to reclassify local roads as minimum maintenance or low volume	29%	19%	26%	16%	9%	2%	25%
Lack of a comprehensive statewide interoperable communications network	22%	16%	26%	19%	14%	4%	33%
Prevailing wage restrictions for construction projects	13%	8%	14%	20%	45%	1%	65%
<b>Shared Services</b>							
State legal restrictions inhibit service sharing opportunities	25%	17%	23%	18%	14%	3%	32%
Lack of time and resources to develop and pursue service sharing opportunities	20%	16%	24%	23%	15%	1%	38%
Citizen opposition to sharing services with other governments	39%	21%	20%	10%	7%	3%	17%
Other local governments partners are resistant to exploring opportunities	32%	20%	20%	16%	11%	2%	26%
<b>Other Items</b>							
County responsibility for the Pre-School Special Education Program	49%	12%	13%	10%	12%	4%	21%
Pension costs and rates of increase	9%	5%	10%	25%	49%	1%	74%
Limitations on admission to promotional civil service exams	41%	18%	21%	11%	5%	3%	16%
Legal framework for collective bargaining	34%	12%	22%	14%	17%	1%	31%
Binding Arbitration	36%	13%	17%	11%	20%	4%	30%

