

Collaboration between Unions, Citizens, & Municipalities: Toward a Common Narrative

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Local governments in New York State are facing unprecedented challenges to financing public service provision. Various state policies in recent years have led to fiscal stress at the local level, which has negative consequences for municipalities, unions and citizens. One frame is that high property taxes and local government inefficiencies are the problem; but another frame points to declining state aid and increased state mandates that put local governments in a bind. **In this report, we examine how local leaders and unions can work together to reframe the narrative to highlight the impact of state austerity policy and the critical role local government services play in ensuring quality of life in our communities.** We profile successful cases of collaboration between municipalities and unions, including a particularly innovative example from Canada. We highlight principles that can lead to successful collaboration between municipalities, unions and citizens to reframe the narrative around local government efficiency and state austerity.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM: ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

During his 2014 re-election campaign, Governor Andrew Cuomo argued that, while state income taxes have decreased, local property taxes are “the problem” caused by the “waste and duplication” of New York’s “over 10,000 local governments.” Other campaign advertisements praised the Governor for balancing four different budgets, eliminating the deficit, and creating a “\$2 billion dollar surplus.” The Governor’s narrative places blame squarely on local governments, painting them as inefficient and redundant. But there is another view.

- First, the 10,000 local governments figure is an overstatement. There are only 1,613 counties, cities, towns and villages in New York State and 675 school districts. Other units are special districts, often created for accounting purposes.
- Second, local governments have held tax expenditures relatively flat in real terms over the past decade, and property taxes were flat or falling even before the tax cap was put in place (see Figure 1).
- Third, State Aid to Municipalities (AIM) funding has fallen in real terms since the recession. The state constitution says that 8% of revenues should be passed on to localities, but the State has never met the “8% standard” (the upper line in Figure 2). In fact, State Aid to Municipalities has gone down by nearly 75% in inflation-adjusted dollars from 1980 to 2014,¹ as shown in the lower line of Figure 2. With a \$2 billion surplus, the State has the opportunity to provide more aid to localities, but the State is planning to hold AIM funding flat until 2018.¹

FIGURE 1: AVERAGE EXPENDITURE VS AVERAGE PROPERTY TAX²

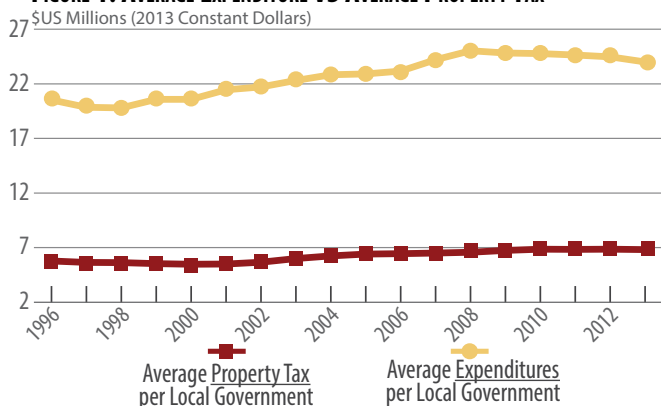
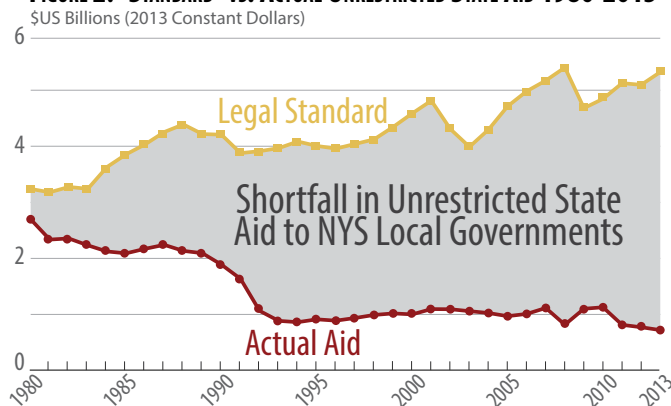


FIGURE 2: “STANDARD” VS. ACTUAL UNRESTRICTED STATE AID 1980-2013³



Data Source: Local Government Data, New York Office of the State Comptroller, 1996-2013

Data Source: Adapted from the Fiscal Policy Institute - see footnote 3



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CHANGING THE FRAME

Several organizations – including the Frameworks Institute, DEMOS, and Public Works – have done research on how to highlight the positive attributes of government, and the critical role that budgets and tax revenues play in helping us achieve our common goals as a society.

Some of these techniques include⁴:

- **Never repeat a negative frame**, otherwise you will reinforce old frames, not helping your audience appreciate new ones.
- **Use metaphors to bridge** and redirect attention to familiar images, connecting individual community issues to root causes.
- Take advantage of Americans' strong belief in **working together to solve problems**. Invite people to be part of the solution.
- Use a **“can-do” belief system** over a “sympathy for the poor” frame. This is critical to opening up public willingness to endorse public solutions to pressing issues. Crisis frames are more likely to disengage the public, making solutions seem impossible.
- **Always interpret data, rather than just present it**, otherwise it is difficult for ordinary people to judge the scope of the problem or solution. Keep the ratio of numbers to narrative low.
- **Draw explicit links between budgets and taxes**, and show that our decisions today may affect our future. Framing taxes as “investments” does not connect with voters.

OPPORTUNITY FOR MUNICIPAL-UNION-CITIZEN COLLABORATION

While unions and local governments agree on the need to change policy, historical antagonisms often get in the way of effective collaboration. However, scholarship can help point us in the right direction. Labor-management partnerships are a means to improve service provision and provide a more effective government for citizens.⁵ Additionally, social movement unionism calls on labor unions to form coalitions with community members to put forward a better vision of society.⁶ These ideas, taken together, highlight the ways in which unions and local governments can work together, and how they can incorporate citizens in the push for better public services.

Our full report highlights several case studies in which this type of collaboration has taken place.

- The City of Rochester, following the 2008 recession, worked with the union to revamp the sanitation department by investing in garbage trucks that required less manpower, reassigning those extra workers to recycling efforts, and installing plows on the trucks to be used during snowstorms. By working together, the City was able to save money without privatizing its sanitation services.⁷
- The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and Canadian municipalities have a long-standing collaborative relationship and their projects address everything from public safety to municipal revenue to citizen participation in community planning. According to Keith Reynolds, National Research Representative for CUPE, “the ‘How’ arises from commitment” from all sides. For unions, this means “treating municipalities as employers and allies.”

Municipal-union-citizen collaboration is both possible and sustainable when there are common goals. In New York State, these common goals exist. Although differences exist between the parties, in the current climate of fiscal stress, commonalities have the potential to be much more powerful. Unions and municipalities can work together to reframe the narrative and identify ways to promote more efficiency in service delivery.

FOOTNOTES

1. Fiscal Policy Institute. (2014). “New York State Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2014-2015”, retrieved from <http://fiscalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/FPI-Budget-Briefing-Book-2014-2015.pdf>
2. Tax Cap Impact Analysis. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.mildredwarner.org/restructuring/fiscal-stress>
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4. Frameworks Institute, “Framing Files”, retrieved from <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/framing-files.html>
5. Rubinstein, S. and McCarthy, J. (2010). Collaborating on School Reform: Creating Union-Management Partnerships to Improve Public School Systems. Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations.
6. Fairbrother, P. (2008). Social Movement Unionism or Trade Unions as Social Movements.” Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal, 20: 213-220.
7. City of Rochester: From an Industrial City to a Knowledge Based Economy (2014), Cornell, retrieved from www.mildredwarner.org/restructuring/fiscal-stress