

Long
Island
439

Costs of living

A study comparing Nassau and Suffolk with the demographically similar Fairfax and Loudoun counties in Northern Virginia found that Long Islanders pay more for bigger government.



BY REID J. EPSTEIN
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The hundreds of units of local government on Long Island lead directly to higher taxes, but not better services, according to a study being released today by the Long Island Index.

The study, which examined government services and attitudes toward government on Long Island and in two Northern Virginia counties, found Long Islanders pay more than 50 percent more in property taxes, yet are far less satisfied with their local public officials than people in suburban Northern Virginia.

The reason, according to the study, lies in Long Island's 439 units of local government, school districts and special districts. In Fairfax and Loudoun counties — Washington, D.C.,

suburbs with about half Long Island's population — there are 17 such districts.

"People have to stand up and say... 'You don't get better service,'" said Charles Zettek, of the Center for Government Research, which did the study.

The two Northern Virginia counties are similar to Long Island in size, cost of living and status as a commuter region next to a major East Coast city.

But unlike Long Island, where open space is scarce, Northern Virginia is a rapidly expanding region where new home construction continues at a fast pace.

Like Long Island, Northern Virginia is affluent and suburban. But while Long Island evolved as a hodgepodge of local governments, Fairfax and Loudoun counties operate with centralized control of local gov-

ernment, schools and fire departments.

For instance, while there are 127 school districts for Long Island's 2.8 million people, the two Northern Virginia counties, with 1.3 million people, have but three — one run by each county and one in the city of Falls Church.

Long Island school districts employ more administrative staff per student and spend about 70 percent more per student for transportation.

Long Island school districts even spend more per student on construction costs, even though the Virginia districts are in the midst of a building boom that will see Loudoun County break ground on six new schools within a year, the study found. It also found Long Island schools pay far more in teacher salaries than their Vir-

Survey says Llers are feeling taxed

BY MICHAEL AMON
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Pat Flynn of Montauk can't count her tax bills on both hands.

There are property tax bills from the school district, town, county and state. There are taxes for the fire district, East Hampton Airport, highways, solid waste disposal, Montauk Light District and something called "scavenger wastewater."

It all amounted to a \$4,600 property tax bill on her 3-bedroom home this year.

Then came state and federal income taxes.

"I can't keep track of it all," said Flynn, 66.

Neither can many of the 808 Long Islanders surveyed by research group Long Island Index for a study released yesterday.

More than 84 percent of Long

Islanders surveyed said taxes were either an "extremely serious" or "very serious" problem. And it's not just how much they pay, but how many taxes are levied and where that money goes.

Kathy and Fred Leonardo of Fort Salonga have watched their property taxes triple — from \$4,800 to more than \$14,000 — in the last 20 years. They can afford it, they say, but not the "administrative waste" in surrounding school districts.

"There are so many supervisors and superintendents," Kathy Leonardo, 53, said. "We should consolidate the school districts."

Rainer Zopf, 66, who owns a condo in Eastport, said high property taxes were just part of Long Island's bigger problem — an unaffordable cost of living.

Zopf, the owner of a CD and DVD manufacturing business



Pat Flynn says she has so many tax bills that she "can't keep track of it all."

with locations across the country, said younger employees often complain about rising taxes just before asking for a raise. His response: "I tell them to move to my plant in New Hampshire. It's cheaper there."

Big,

One bad apple doesn't spoil the whole bunch. Or so the saying goes. But how many bad apples will it take to shake — and I mean, really shake — Long Island into considering something new?

The Roosevelt school district is in financial disarray. How much more state and local money — our money — will circle down the drain before Roosevelt children get the kind of education they deserve?

Three fire districts and one ambulance district yield eight Suffolk County residents charged with stealing taxpayer money, from their neighbors, no less.

The Nassau County clerk's office, according to an audit from the county comptroller's office, lacks the oversight capability to properly manage hundreds of millions of dollars.

FIRE SERVICES

Northern
Virginia
17

Long
Island
179

Northern
Virginia
21

Number of fire departments

Equipment, operating costs

\$82.50
Long Island

\$39.77
Northern
Virginia

Personnel costs

\$22.90
Long Island
(Volunteer force)

\$125.18
Northern
Virginia

Cost per capita

Government entities*

*INCLUDE DEPARTMENTS, AGENCIES
AND TAX DISTRICTS

SOURCE: LONG ISLAND INDEX '07

of 2 suburbs

toward government on LI and in 2 Northern Virginia counties reveals LIers' discontent

PERCENTAGE WHO THINK THEY GET THEIR TAX DOLLARS' WORTH OF GOVERNMENT SERVICES:



Long Islanders
34%



Northern Virginians
62%

NOW ONLINE

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The study compared data from the U.S. Census, the National Center for Education Statistics and other public databases. Telephone survey included 808 adults on LI and 605 adults in Virginia Sept. 12-Dec. 7. Margins of error are 3.4 percent for Long Island and 4 percent for Virginia.

sponsive to local needs. However, the survey found that Northern Virginians are far more satisfied with their schools and local government than are Long Islanders.

On Long Island, 36 percent of people feel it's "very or somewhat easy to get help from an elected official." In Northern Virginia, 45 percent of people felt that way.

More than 70 percent of Northern Virginians rated the value they get from property taxes as "excellent," compared with fewer than 50 percent of Long Islanders.

Thomas Suozzi and Steve Levy, the Nassau and Suffolk county executives, both said the study validates their efforts to eliminate some of the more than 400 governmental districts on Long Island.

"If you talk to anyone at a

family barbecue or at lunch, they're going to say that common-sensically, we have too many governments," Suozzi said. "The problem is, it's very complex to figure out how to unravel it."

Suozzi has made reducing the layers of government in Nassau a signature issue and is pushing for a \$750,000 study of how to do so.

Levy said the region should take small steps toward consolidating functions first, rather than eliminating districts, a process he said would prove very difficult politically.

"It's not going to be realistic to expect that districts will consolidate," Levy said. "But we can consolidate functions between districts. Security, buildings and grounds, borrowing, health insurance, transportation, those are things that can be shared."

ginia counterparts.

The Virginia counties each have their own centralized professional fire department. Accordingly, there are only 58 fire stations in the two counties, compared with 381 on Long Is-

land, an area 1.3 times larger. Even with Long Island's largely volunteer fire departments, residents pay more for equipment and operating costs for fire service than Virginia counterparts. Excluding personnel,

Long Islanders pay more than twice as much.

Long Islanders have historically resisted consolidation of taxing districts, preferring instead to maintain smaller units that they believe are more re-

bad government the bane of LI

And while that may not be illegal, it's more than a shame, since the office is one of the few in county government that's supposed to bring in significant revenue.

Incompetence. Thievery. People entrusted with the public's welfare abusing that trust to line their own pockets or — in the case of some of the top deputies in the Nassau clerk's office — to hold tight to politically connected jobs.

This is what passes for



THE COLUMN
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governance on Long Island.

How many school officials have pleaded guilty to how many crimes? By my count, more than half of the town building departments on Long Island are under investigation by the Nassau and Suffolk district attorneys' offices.

Why do we accept the wasting of hard-earned taxpayer money?

Yesterday, the Long Island Index released a report that, essentially, says that the region could save money by collapsing hundreds of taxing jurisdictions into something significantly smaller. It compares our abundance of districts to a handful

in suburban Northern Virginia.

The one quibble I have with the report is that it doesn't take much to infer that since Northern Virginia appears to be doing a better job managing schools and other services, that Long Island should follow its lead.

Nah.

I know Fairfax County, with its horrendous rush-hour traffic and monster regional malls. (To my brothers and other relatives in Fairfax County: I'm sorry. We may have traffic up here, but we have beaches and New York City, too.)

The challenge for Long Island is to fashion something unique to the region that would accomplish the goals of slowing — or, dare I say, reducing — property tax increases, while preserving what's best about Nassau and Suffolk.

This year, everybody from Gov. Eliot Spitzer to Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy

to Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi and, as of today, the Long Island Index, is banging the drum loudly for consolidating the region's hundreds of layers of taxing entities.

It will be a big task, and maybe, given Long Island's lust for local control, even an impossible one. But radical change is necessary.

And it's already beginning to happen.

In Suffolk, Levy is working with school districts to try to consolidate security, buildings and grounds, printing and purchasing functions to lower costs. He is also investigating the possibility of creating a consortium that would allow schools to obtain lower-cost financing for health care.

In Nassau, Suozzi wants to create what he calls a "blueprint for consolidation." And in Albany, Spitzer has prom-

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ised to appoint a Commission on Local Government Efficiency to report back with a plan of action for consolidation.

Meanwhile, both county district attorneys seem to be shooting at bad apples in a barrel.

And so, the stage is set. Will things change, and for the better?

That, ultimately, depends on how much we want them to.

GENERAL INFO

5.5% **25.4%**

Long Island Northern Virginia

Growth (1990-2000)

SCHOOLS

Long Island
127



Northern Virginia
3

Number of districts

\$2,995 **\$1,934**

Long Island Northern Virginia

Cost per capita

Long Island
2.8 million

Northern Virginia
1.3 million

Population (2005)