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Kevin Gaughan said Cuomo borrowed some of his ideas for reducing government.
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Cuomo offers plan to reduce entrenched bureaucracy

Citizens would be empowered to eliminate costly and redundant layers of

government

By Tom Precious
NEWS ALBANY BUREAU

ALBANY — Laws that protect the existence of more than 10,000 local government entities across New York would be overhauled under a plan empowering citizens to eliminate often costly and redundant layers of government.

“Elected officials come and go, administrations come and go, and there’s remaining an entrenched, permanent government — entrenched interests — that preserve themselves,” said Attorney General Andrew M. Cuomo, who unveiled his sweeping proposal during a news conference Thursday.

“The political process has preserved this level and number of governments because it serves their political purposes,” Cuomo added.

The attorney general said there are at least 10,500 local government bodies across the state — such as counties, towns, school districts, authorities and special districts — that can tax and assess fees for everything from town lighting to sewage systems. But he acknowledged that some are so well hidden that no one really knows how many exist.

Erie County, though, leads the state, with 939 public bodies — not including towns, villages, cities, authorities, fire districts and school districts. When those are added in, the number swells to 1,044 — including 427 lighting districts, 144 drainage districts and 143 water agencies. Onondaga County ranks second, with 867. Niagara County has 92, Chautauqua 150 and Genesee 40, according to Cuomo’s office.

Critics say the current state law is inconsistent and often a barrier to merging government entities. The Cuomo proposal calls for a new law that would be “clear, consistent and give citizens a uniform process across the various forms of government.”

A top adviser to Gov. David A. Paterson, Peter Kiernan, said the governor supports the Cuomo proposal. The idea faces its biggest obstacle in the Legislature, where many rank-and-file lawmakers have friends and patronage posts on local agencies.

“That’s a lot of jobs. That’s a lot of patronage. That’s a lot of bureaucracy, and they haven’t wanted it to stop,” Cuomo said of those who would oppose his plan.

His proposal joins a long list of ideas that have come and gone in Albany over the decades to try to do something about the cost of providing government services, only to be beaten back by various stakeholders.

The proposal affects only local governments and does not include counties or cities. The state cannot mandate any of the consolidations.

The plan makes it easier for citizens to dissolve local agencies and even villages. It allows 10 percent of the voters or 5,000 people, whichever is less, to petition a local entity to begin its dissolution or consolidation process. A local vote by residents would then be held, and, if approved, the targeted entity would have to dissolve or consolidate operations.

Local entities also could start the process. Under the plan, special districts would be able to dissolve themselves. A referendum would be required to dissolve a town or village.

The Cuomo plan also gives expanded powers to county governments to dissolve local entities, subject to a countywide referendum.

The idea did not sit well with some local government officials.

“It sounds like it’s giving counties the ability to abolish towns. I don’t know why counties are any more qualified to think that local governments are good or bad within them,” said Jeffrey Haber, executive director of the Association of Towns of the State of New York.

Haber also called the citizen petition process unworkable, a magnet for misinformation and one that could prove costly.

County officials had a different take.

“These initiatives are critical, especially in today’s economy, and will help streamline these statutes to authorize localities to govern more effectively,” said Stephen Acquario, director of the New York State Association of Counties.

Mark Poloncarz, Erie County comptroller, joined Cuomo at the Albany news conference and pointed to a report he issued earlier this year showing that the state has 1,133 tax assessment entities, compared with 57 in California and 67 in Florida. Erie County alone has 30 — more than Hawaii, Montana, Arizona and Delaware combined, he said.

“His proposal will take it to a new level to make it easier to move forward. It doesn’t force anyone to do it, but it creates a more user-friendly environment to allow municipalities or voters to say, ‘Enough is enough, we want smaller government,’ ” the comptroller said.

“If there’s one thing we know, it’s that Erie County has so many duplicative levels of service that it boggles the mind,” he added.

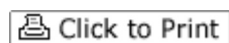
Kevin Gaughan, a regionalism advocate in Erie County, said Cuomo borrowed some of his ideas to try to reduce the layers of local government.

“The good news is Andrew has come on board. The bad news,” he said, “is it took 10 years of work, a national recession, collapse of the state’s economy and hundreds of thousands of folks leaving our communities.”

Gaughan said local consolidation efforts cannot wait, however, on Albany to act, and said he plans on new downsizing campaigns next spring in Clarence and West Seneca and will push for dissolution of the villages of Angola and Blasdell. He said citizens can now petition to eliminate government bodies, but acknowledged it is a complex process.

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