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### EDITORIALS

## Crisis provides opportunity

**State losses highlight necessity of making government more efficient**

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The financial meltdown on Wall Street is a crisis. It would be a terrible waste if the state of New York and its Byzantine collection of cities, counties, towns, villages and school districts did not take advantage of an otherwise frightening situation by using it as an excuse to launch statewide reforms in the very structure of state government.

Such reforms must include widespread consolidation of many functions of local government, if not outright merger of the government units themselves. They must also include new labor agreements that trim the cost of pension and health benefits that the state and its subdivisions couldn't afford even when the overall economy was riding high.

Things that were theoretically a good idea before become an economic necessity in times such as these. And only by being an economic necessity are they likely to become politically viable.

Gov. David A. Paterson has been warning for months that the ATM that was Wall Street is already producing sharply less income for the state than it has become accustomed to. And now, with income, bonuses and jobs falling away from the financial sector like branches in a fall ice storm, the state's financial woes are only going to get worse; the state's initial projections include a 20 percent, \$700 million decline in taxes linked to Wall Street bonuses and a 24 percent, \$1.7 billion decline in capital gains tax revenues.

Attorney General Andrew M. Cuomo, citing the never-waste-a-crisis philosophy, says he will take advantage of the situation to push for legislative reforms that will ease any effort in any locality to merge, consolidate or eliminate special districts or other layers of government.

Such structuring might be thought to be outside the attorney general's portfolio. But when something is economically necessary, it is any good lawyer's job to make it legally doable.

Closer to home, Erie County Legislature Chairwoman Lynn M. Marinelli has called for a county government hiring freeze and has already imposed one on the Legislature's own offices. In so doing, the Democrat from the Town of Tonawanda has upped the ante on County Executive Chris Collins and his softer hiring slowdown.

Actually, efficient, consolidated and transparent government has always been, and always will be, a better inducement to sustainable business activity than any amount of government gifts or giveaways. If nothing else, efficient government benefits all business, not just those lucky or well-connected enough to win special favors.

It is simple human nature that hard changes in long-established habits may come only when outside events conspire to force new thinking. And outside events are conspiring, big time.

If not now, when?

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