

2017 Legislative Conference
New York State Association of Counties

Hon. William E. Cherry, President
Remarks to the Full Delegation

January 31, 2017

First, I'd like to acknowledge the former NYSAC presidents that are here with us today.

Lucille McKnight, Albany County Legislator
Jean Raymond, Saratoga County Supervisor
Anthony Picente, Oneida County Executive
Tom Santulli, Chemung County Executive

Thank you all for your continued service and commitment to NYSAC.

Ladies and gentlemen – friends and colleagues – before we can talk about the important budget issues that we face, things like funding for E-911; internet sales tax collection; Foster Care cost shifts; and the cost of Indigent Defense, I stand here as your association President and I feel that I must first respond to the latest budget proposal that even further expands upon the Albany PR campaign to shift the blame for high property taxes in New York State onto us as county officials.

It has been a masterful strategy by Albany and the legislature to point the finger at someone else... ANYONE else... as a political defense against voter dissatisfaction with the unreasonable, and unpopular, high cost of property taxes in this state.

Rather than addressing the true, root cause of the problem and tackling the very difficult and challenging task of taking steps to fix it, Albany has found an easy target to point to and say “THERE is your problem!... High property taxes are the result of inefficiencies at the local level, and your county officials simply, and stubbornly, refuse to deal with them.”

This has been a brilliant strategy by Albany of creating a scapegoat to be the focal point of public unrest over high property taxes.

Not only have they painted us as the villains over the past four or five years, they have, at the same time, somehow managed to present themselves as the Heroes in this almost epic battle of good versus evil!

Property taxes are too high? “Don’t worry – we will institute a tax cap to keep those inefficient, (and not very attentive), local officials of yours from increasing your taxes!”

And then, a year or two later, Albany said “Hey, those property taxes are STILL too high! Don’t worry Mr. and Mrs. Taxpayer – we’re on it!” “We will force your stubbornly high-spending local officials to submit “efficiency plans” that will show how they will cut operating expenses and thus, lower your property taxes.”

In a brilliant political turning of the tables that you just can’t help but admire – Albany paints us as the villain and themselves as the heroes.

But of course... despite the tax cap, and despite the efficiency plans, and despite what Albany claims has been effective mandate relief... property taxes have not gone down, have they? In fact, they have continued to rise.

Well, if you serve in Albany, SOMEONE certainly has to take the blame for those politically unpopular taxes that are driving people out of this state.

County officials have been willing to jump through the hoops that Albany has held up so far, so why not try it again? Albany WANTS us to accept responsibility for those high property taxes.

Their latest proposal to force us to find even more cost savings and shared services, and to then put these “tax-cutting plans” up for a public referendum are just one more tactic to shift the conversation from where it really needs to be.

Of course this latest proposal will not reduce the high cost of property taxes in New York State. How could it?

School taxes account for 65% of every homeowner’s property tax bill, and redefining how schools are funded in this state is not even a part of the discussion.

County taxes account for 18-20% of the annual tax bill, and everyone in this room already knows that essentially that entire county tax bill is used to pay for unfunded, state-mandated, programs.

Trying to reduce high property taxes by insisting that local governments be more cost-efficient is like trying to cut down a giant oak tree with a tiny fingernail clipper... The problem is far too big, and the tool is far too small.

So if we REALLY want to have a serious discussion in this state about reducing property taxes, the first two items on the agenda must be school taxes, and unfunded mandates.

Together, those two items account for 85% of the local property taxes that are crippling our upstate economy and causing a shift in population out of the state.

That doesn’t mean that we are opposed to finding even more ways to share services or continuing the search for more cost-effective ways of providing services to the people we serve.

In fact, not only are we, as county officials, not the villains here... we are the all-time undisputed HEAVYWEIGHT WORLD CHAMPIONS at sharing services!

We partner with our towns and villages and with the State to plow and sand each other's roads. We share highway equipment and other resources in order to save money.

We use the massive purchasing power of state government to buy our supplies and services off of state contract.

We participate in great municipally-owned programs like NYMIR to save money on our insurance coverage... and the list goes on and on.

I am proud to stand here before you and say that in my 24 years in this organization I have never met a more conscientious and dedicated group of public servants and professionals than those of you that sit here in this room today.

All of us have dedicated our professional careers toward the laudable goal of serving our constituents in the most comprehensive, yet cost-efficient, way possible.

If Albany wants the help and advice of some of the best efficiency experts on the planet to help them lower property taxes – those of us in this room stand at the ready.

If Albany wants to explore alternative ways to fund the 85% of every property tax bill that falls squarely on THEIR shoulders – not ours – then we can help them. But we will help them as respected partners and equals in public service. We will help them to find ways to change the ways schools are funded and to eliminate the burden of unfunded state mandates.

But if what Albany wants to do is to deflect the conversation... and the blame... for the REAL reason that property taxes are too high in this state, then as county officials we must fight back.

Albany seems to be determined to point the finger directly at us and tell the public that, "if only your local officials were more receptive to change, or more innovative in finding efficiencies", then surely, property taxes could be significantly reduced.

If that is the refrain that they are going to stick to - then we must fight back.

I can tell you that I will not... and I hope that all of us in NYSAC will not... quietly stand by allow this assault by Albany to continue to go unanswered.

Thank you for giving me the honor and privilege of standing here and serving you as your NYSAC President during these challenging times.

I cannot promise you that during my tenure here that we can win this battle with Albany.

Honestly – it shouldn't even BE a battle – it should be a partnership.

But we have to keep our eye on the ball. There are so many important issues to discuss:

- E-911 funding
- Indigent Defense
- Foster Care cost shifts
- And making sure that each of our counties receives our fair share of internet sales taxes.

But I can promise you this – I will not stand by allow my life's work, or the life's work of the great many people in this room whom I so deeply admire, to be diminished nor minimized by the actions or words of others.

I am willing to be the State's partner – but I will not be their scapegoat.

Thank you.

Bill Cherry
NYSAC President and Schoharie County Treasurer
January 31, 2017