

A Long Island Briefing

What Every Long Islander Should Know About Northern Virginia

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

“One of the great unnatural wonders of the world . . . more complicated than any other that mankind has yet contrived or allowed to happen.” That is how urban expert Robert Wood described the New York area’s complex, multi-layered web of local governments.

Long Island alone, between counties, cities, towns, villages, school districts, and special districts, numbers 439 separate entities.

Many have suggested that a simpler, more centralized government would do a better job of addressing regional needs—such as Long Island’s dire need of affordable housing, which faces an uphill battle against local zoning boards.

And, a centralized government could cut waste, improve efficiency, and lower our staggering tax bills. Those bills are sapping our region’s vitality, by driving away the young professionals that businesses need to prosper.

But some people fear that a more centralized government would provide poorer quality services and be less responsive to citizens’ concerns.

To provide perspective, the Long Island Index undertook a comparison between Long Island and the counties of Fairfax and Loudoun in Northern Virginia. We commissioned a study of government structures and costs in the two regions, as well as a survey of residents’ attitudes toward their respective regions, governments, and services.

The two regions are comparable in size, and Northern Virginia is even more affluent than Long Island. But its government structure is as centralized as ours is decentralized—with 17 entities to our 439.

Most important, government costs there are far lower than ours. In fact, per capita costs are 45 percent—\$1,722—higher on Long Island. That’s almost \$7,000 extra per family of four.

All of us would like to save that kind of money. But what would we have to give up? Is Northern Virginia getting the same quality of services that Long Islanders are used to? Are their schools as good? Are their governments responsive to citizens’ concerns?

The answers are: Yes, yes, and yes. Our polls revealed that residents of Northern Virginia are:

- More satisfied with the quality of government services. Eighty-eight percent rate services as “Excellent” or “Good,” compared to 75% on Long Island.
- More satisfied with schools. Seventy-nine percent rate them “Excellent” or “Good,” compared to 64% on Long Island.
- More likely to trust their county government to do what is right all or most of the time—by 51% to 26%.
- More likely to think it would be very or somewhat easy to get help from an elected official—by 45% to 36%.

Regions throughout the country, in an effort to stay competitive, are trying new approaches to local governance. These approaches range from informal collaborations among localities, to regional authorities empowered to address specific areas of need, to outright consolidation of government entities.

As Long Island considers its options, the findings in our study offer reassurance. Indeed, they may encourage us to be bold. They tell us that new ways of doing things may not only save us money, but actually improve services and access to government.

Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation, and convener of the Long Island Index.. The Index provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policy making. For more information visit www.longislandindex.org.