

Highway upkeep eyed

Smithtown weighs taking over villages' road departments

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The Town of Smithtown would take over highway maintenance services from its three villages under a plan that could roll out this year.

The plan, outlined in a New York State grant application from Smithtown Public Safety Director John Valentine's office and letters from the mayors supporting the application, calls for the Village of the Branch, Head of the Harbor and Nissequogue to stop operational and capital funding of highway functions.

Federal highway funding to the villages would be administered by the town, and a portion of village tax dollars would be reallocated to Smithtown's roughly \$30 million highway budget, according to the application, although officials said the amount from each village would have to be negotiated.

In return, the town highway department would add about 32 miles of village roads to the 470 miles it maintains and plows. The \$799,982 state grant awarded to the town late last year would buy a truck and salt

barn, tablet computers and software to manage complaints and work orders: tools both basic and high-tech for a centralized highway department.

For the plan to take effect, the boards that run each village would have to approve service agreements with the town.

Villages would remain the "primary contact for their residents' highway complaints, so they can ensure resident buy-in to the consolidation proposal" and keep the "small-town feel" of local government, the grant application authors write.

Smithtown spokeswoman Nicole Garguilo did not make town officials familiar with the grant application available for an interview, but said in an email that town officials were confident they could "provide the highest quality services at the most reasonable cost to our residents."

Lee Park, a spokesman for the New York State Department of State, called the proposal "important and significant," if not precedent-setting. Over the past decade, dozens of Long Island municipalities, school and fire districts have explored or entered into consolidation or shared service agreements.

In Smithtown, better productivity and efficiencies of scale would keep routine and emergency costs lower, on a per-mile basis, than the current system, ac-



The town plans to run the highway offices of Village of the Branch, Head of the Harbor and Nissequogue.

ording to the grant application. Currently, Head of the Harbor uses private contractors, and Nissequogue relies on the town Highway Department for much of its work. The municipalities already cooperate on some highway projects.

The fiscal impact of consolidation on town taxpayers was not clear in the grant application. Garguilo said in an email that "there is no anticipated increase in taxes," but did not provide details. Taxes for the 5,000 village residents would drop, according to the grant application.

Nissequogue Mayor Rich Smith, whose village already uses town services for mowing, milling and snow plowing, said it was difficult to calculate the total savings for his village, but he believed they were substantial. A typical bill from the town for roadside mowing might come to \$400; and a private contractor's bill would range into the thousands, he said.

Mayors of Head of the Harbor and Village of the Branch said they wanted more detailed information about costs and benefits before committing to consolidation.

"It's not that we don't think this isn't a great thing to do, but we're responsible for the residents and highway is the most visible service we provide," Branch Mayor Mark Delaney said. "We want to make sure on behalf of our residents that we're giving them the best services we can."

Head of the Harbor Mayor Douglas Dahlgard said he would be hesitant to give up his village's highway department: "You're closer to government, and if somebody wants something to be done, they call and get a response very quickly," he said.

Plan to report per-school spending debated

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
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A state proposal requiring school systems to report spending on a building-by-building basis has education experts arguing over whether that would promote greater fairness or simply drown districts in paperwork.

Until now, district spending under state and federal law has been reported mostly on a system-wide basis.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has called for the state's largest districts, including Brentwood and Hempstead on Long Island, to show how money is distributed to individual schools. The proposal is part of the governor's annual budget, released last week.

Advocates say that reporting per-student spending school-by-school would give parents and others an easy means of making comparisons. Proponents such as Education Trust New York, a Manhattan-based advocacy group, also say this approach would address suspicions that schools in poorer neighborhoods might not be getting their fair share of financial support.

Local school administrators, however, object that the task of determining what portion of a districtwide program goes to an individual school — special education, for instance — could be



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enormously time-consuming.

"We have eight schools, so the amount of work this entails — that could be an enormous amount of paperwork," said Richard Loeschner, the Brentwood superintendent.

State Education Commissioner Maryellen Elia took note of such objections Monday during a brief question-and-answer session with reporters.

Elia agreed on the need to help poor schools. She added, though, that she had heard concerns expressed over the possibility that authorities in Albany might tell some distant school

that "you can't do something with your budget."

Cuomo's plan would require 15 districts statewide to submit detailed annual plans, showing how much they planned to spend in each school. Funding figures would be accompanied by student demographic data.

The state's Education Department and Division of the Budget would review proposed funding distribution, and any district where the plan was not approved would be denied its annual increase in state aid.

New York City and four other systems would be required to submit plans for the 2018-19 school year. An additional 10 districts, including Brentwood and Hempstead, would have to pro-

vide plans in 2019-20.

School-by-school financial reports in some form appear likely, whether Cuomo wins legislative approval of his particular plan or not.

Congress already has implanted such a reporting requirement in its school funding statute, the Every Student Succeeds Act, which was signed into law in 2015.

Washington's measure, unlike Cuomo's initiative, would not give government authorities a veto over local school spending. But it does mandate school-by-school spending reports and would apply to public schools nationwide when it takes effect. The expected start date is Dec. 31, 2019.