

HIGH TAXES, LOW GROWTH & MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

A Multi-Part Report by Concerned Geneva Taxpayers

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INSTALLMENT FIVE – THE TOWN

The Town of Geneva, together with Seneca Lake and Border City, essentially surrounds the City, and, as of the 2020 U.S Census, the Town had approximately 3,500 residents. The Town's growth has been relatively steady over a significant period of time, and today is home to many who have moved there for, among other reasons, relief from the City's egregiously high property taxes. As noted in the first Installment of this Report, the City's property tax rate in 2022 was approximately **19.6 times higher** than that of the Town's, which ranked among the very lowest in the State.

One can hardly fault the residents of the Town for the political decision and discipline to control costs and maintain a low property tax rate. By the same token, who can reasonably blame the residents of the City for believing that the cost of the services they are paying for, aggravated by the effects of a large portion of property tax exempt property located within Geneva's boundaries, is being borne by only a percentage of those that benefit from them? It does seem, in this age of fairness and equity, that serious thought should be focused on the unequal sharing of costs for services that, in many respects, equally benefit both populations.

This outcome, however, is the result of the geographies that were established by the State of New York over time when its scheme of political subdivisions was implemented. Accordingly, many of the laws that followed have a distinct financial or quality of life impact beyond the geographic authority of the political subdivision making a decision. A key example in the Finger Lakes region are decisions made by local municipalities within whose boundaries the two landfills are located, and who financially benefit from them being there. Their decisions with respect to those dumps have a direct bearing on the lives of many area residents not within those specific geographies and who have no direct say in the matter.

That's effectively what's happening here in reverse with respect to municipal property taxes. It seems that the same principles that suggest a college or university should bear some of the costs associated with services from which it benefits should likewise have application as between

municipalities, at least where the inequities are clearly obvious. Redress of this inequity may need to be sought in the State legislature and/or the State or Federal courts.

Also, isn't it time to take a more serious approach to mandating the elimination of redundancies in the providing of municipal services, where reasonably feasible? There are reasons why this may not happen on its own (not the least of which may be decades-old animosities for reasons long forgotten), but are those reasons enough to deny equitable tax treatment whenever and wherever it can reasonably be found?

Business recruitment and growth is another area for serious reflection. The City, while perhaps low on land that can reasonably be developed, has basic infrastructure facilities and service support for police, fire, water, sewer and other services. The Town has developed some of this, and at present has the right to develop more, but is that a good answer for the community as a whole? When was the last time a critical assessment was done to evaluate the economics of redundant capabilities, and, as neighboring communities, is there wisdom in fostering a competitive economic development environment? Probably not, but can and has the case effectively been made that there is more to gain through cooperation than through competition?

Another thought on the City-Town relationship is the concept of "mutual aid". This occurs, for example, when a crime is committed in the Town. The Town officially relies on the County Sheriff's office for law enforcement. As a matter of practice, however, the County will usually notify the Geneva Police Department that there has been an incident in the Town requiring a presence. Typically, the City will respond by sending one or more units to the Town to assist as necessary, and has done so many times in recent years.

It does not appear that the City is in any way compensated for its willingness to do this, and the concept of "mutual" is essentially a misnomer since the Town has no police force with which to reciprocate. The Town does pay the County for added service specific to the Town, and, in fairness, it would seem should do something of a similar nature for the City. This arrangement needs to be scrutinized to determine just how much of the City law enforcement costs are helping folks not paying for it.

With the same notion in mind, the City and Town mutually assist one another with respect to fire protection. With fire protection, it is relatively common for neighboring communities to help each other out in this way. However, some might reasonably question the fairness of this arrangement in the case of the Town and the City, since the City's fire department is larger and better equipped than that of the Town. While the City's need is greater because of its larger size, no money is changing hands by virtue of the City's enhanced capability.

When attempting to discuss solutions for the inequities inherent in some of the redundancies between the two municipalities, residents of the Town often make it clear that they do not want to share the burden of the costs needlessly or foolishly being incurred by the City. Perhaps in the minds of some, the City's budget pays for "needless" or "foolish" costs, but this begs other questions of the nature raised above. The concepts of fairness and equity have a legitimate place in many societal conversations, and it seems those concepts can reasonably be raised in this discussion as well.

Next: Installment Six – Governance

Concerned Geneva Taxpayers is a small group of individuals with a mission of informing the public about aspects of the financial crisis that is engulfing the City of Geneva and threatening to further limit the quality of life here. More on the organization can be found at www.concernedgenevataxpayers.org.