

Testimony to the New York State Commission on
Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness

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On June 8 of '06 I delivered a speech about Special Districts that focused on Sanitation District number two and my experiences before, during, and after my bid for a seat on the Board of Sanitation Commissioners. It has come to my attention through my experiences this passed year that in order to enact changes for the betterment of our future, we must always look to the experiences of our past.

It was the 31st day of March in 2005, when Harvey Levinson held a town hall meeting to discuss Special District Taxes. This forum is where unaware residents of South Hempstead, Baldwin Oaks, and North Rockville Centre were informed that we have the highest Fire Tax rate in the county as well as the title of second highest taxed community when it comes to Sanitation. This meeting—intended to be informative—was derailed from its cause when it escalated into a protest by SH Fire Fighters and uniformed officers from surrounding communities, changing a seemingly serene symposium to an angered anti-consolidation rally.

This is where my journey began. I focused on the Sanitation District, contacted my elected officials and attended meetings—a place where on one such occasion I and several others were told by a Hempstead Town Official that the residents of Sanitation District number two “don’t mind paying twice as much to have [their] garbage picked up.” We were also informed by certain Town officials that because they wielded no power over Special Districts, our only course of action to enact change would be to run for commissioner ourselves. And that is *exactly* what I did.

It was anything but a smooth ride. I was campaigned against by the Commissioners as well as the workforce. Tax dollars were used to pay for the printing *and* delivery of flyers denouncing me and my ideas. Workers were told by supervisors that should I win, they would all lose their jobs. I was stopped on the street by angry workers and my family and I were harassed by numerous threatening phone calls.

While you keep this in mind, I ask that you also remember that the majority of these firefighters and sanitation workers are the same overtaxed residents as we ourselves are. There are long-standing political forces in Nassau County that perpetuate fear in these very workers, though it is indeed the *upper management* positions in these districts that stand to have the most to lose should consolidation occur.

During this same speech I also spoke of a newly-formed organization dedicated to the achievement of more proficient and well-organized Special Districts. RESD has since

flourished into a network of concerned citizens banded together for the sake of community education, in an on-going effort to save ourselves from this Death by Government.

This campaign was an uphill battle to reach a sensible yet seemingly lofty goal. I continued on though—all the while trying to avoid the many rocks and boulders that were continually being hurled at me. It was a difficult time in my life, and though I did not know it at the time, I was not alone in my struggle. Besides my many compatriots, there were—unbeknownst to me—many a citizen alike who had to persevere against the continual intimidation of these Special District Club Houses.

At a meeting before a county legislator in Levittown, an elderly man and his wife recounted the story of their local fire department's fund raiser. The department solicited donations in a previous year in exchange for stenciling the residents' house number on their curb. The following year the elderly couple found themselves living on as little as 30,000 dollars a year in fixed income and ever-rising taxes. They had to decline making a contribution to the fire department due to depleted family finances. As a result, the firemen came around and blocked out the house number previously painted on the couple's curb. When the elderly man protested he was told that he had better make a contribution in order to preserve his curb number. He made a small contribution, the firefighters returned and repainted the house number, but before leaving they warned the elderly gentleman that his contribution next year should be larger—or the same thing would happen again.

Pettiness at the local sanitation districts and their respective commissioners is no better as it has reached new levels of paranoia. A RESD F.O.I.L request to a south-shore special sanitation district was met with a local politician calling a family member of a RESD founder and demanding that said FOIL request be rescinded by fax in less than 10 minutes. The RESD founder complied by rescinding the request. However, the implied threat of political, financial and personal retribution to this day remains a constant source of concern and quite frankly, a borderline case of intimidation tactics reminiscent of the days of RICO charges being brought by US attorneys on a daily basis.

It is apparent to us that many of our local level politicians are neither willing nor able to stand up against the special taxing districts that have for far too long been the economic engine that drives local politics. We want one Town sanitation district with one tax rate for all the residents. We want the Fire Districts to adhere to a higher authority that will reign in the outlandish expenditures and help to organize a body that will successfully and competently safeguard our community. We long for a new generation of 21st century politicians who hear us when we cry efficiency and we want it to start here, with this Commission. Governor Spitzer has charged you with finding solutions to this archaic tax-system, and so we implore you to take our words under consideration. “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”¹, because when the people lead, the leaders will follow.

¹ Margaret Mead