



May 25, 2011

Reject the Tax Cap

Gov. Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature have already adopted a state budget that drastically cuts funds to schools and local communities — cuts that were far deeper than needed to balance the budget because of Mr. Cuomo's indefensible refusal to extend a tax surcharge on New York's wealthiest residents. Now they want to adopt a cheap political tool — [a 2 percent property tax cap](#) — that would only further devastate communities around the state that can least afford it.

Mr. Cuomo calls the proposal "a game changer." He's right. In the same way that Proposition 13 has ravaged California, a New York property tax cap would do huge damage to already struggling schools and the state's long-term economic competitiveness. California's education system was once the envy of the nation. Education Week now ranks it 46th for achievement in grades K-12, below Alabama and South Carolina. New York schools currently rank 8th. For how much longer?

Not surprising, the Albany politicians and business leaders championing the tax cap don't like to talk about California. Instead, they point to Massachusetts, which capped property taxes at 2.5 percent in 1980. It wasn't a happy tale there, either. Communities starved of needed revenues were forced to lay off teachers, police officers and firefighters and to shut libraries and senior centers.

Massachusetts schools suffered so badly that the Legislature had to pump in more and more state financing, especially to the poorer school districts.

Mr. Cuomo and other backers insist that communities will still have a choice. The cap could be overridden by a vote of 60 percent of residents in the tax district. (Whatever happened to a simple democratic majority?) Wealthier taxpayers may well vote that way, especially to maintain good schools. It is far less likely to happen in the poorer districts.

When New York's politicians go on about how New York fails to draw businesses because of high taxes, even they must know that's ridiculous. Taxes generally rank behind education, infrastructure and other criteria when businesses decide to relocate and invest. Employees and bosses want to know about the schools. Business owners want to know if there is an educated work force. No public services? Who wants to move or work there?

Let's be clear: A tax cap is nothing more than a political crutch for politicians who don't have the courage to argue the case for more taxes or for spending cuts.

Mr. Cuomo, the Legislature and local politicians have to make the tough decisions to raise revenue and wrestle down personnel costs, streamline services and rationalize costly state mandates.

Property taxes in New York are undeniably high. But a tax cap is not the answer. It is an invitation to disaster.