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Villages Fight Nassau County Headquarters Tax

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Ask county to repeal tax for rarely used police services

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Adding to bill
The effort to repeal the headquarters tax comes a year after Nassau started billing the villages for nonspecialty services such as checking burglar alarm reports or traffic collisions. That billing system applies when a village requests county officers to supplement its own police force for nonemergency services, Krumpter said.

The costs of those calls vary depending on the how long county officers are used and whether they work overtime, Mutitontown Police Chief William McHale said.

Rockville Centre’s Murray called that payment program “grossly unfair” to villages already taxed for specialty police assistance through the headquarters tax.

Krumpter said only a “few” pay-per-use bills for nonemergency assistance have been sent to villages since June.

Lake Success Mayor Ronald Cooper said his village only uses the county’s detective services and would support getting rid of the headquarters tax in favor of paying just for what they use.

“Our people pay a rather large sum for that service. Frankly, I think the mayor of Rockville Centre has a terrific idea,” Cooper said, adding “I cannot imagine that the county will embrace it.”

Freeport Village Mayor Andrew Hardwick supported Murray’s call for a single pay-per-use fee, saying in a statement that it would "help to relieve the tax burden on our residents."

But Hempstead Village Mayor Wayne Hall said paying per use would not work in his community, which has one of the highest crime rates on Long Island. “We use the services provided through the headquarters tax more than Rockville Centre,” Hall said. “If we decide to drop the services and pay as needed, it might cost us more.”

Help in emergencies
Port Washington Police District Chief William Kilfoil said the benefit of the headquarters tax is in emergencies. He cited a man barricading himself in his house in December and having 50 county officers, including those from the Bureau of Special Operations, respond and resolve the incident without injuries.

“The headquarters tax was worth its weight” in that case, Kilfoil said.

But Murray worries that the value of the tax is diminished as the county cuts its police force and services in an effort to reduce its budget deficit. In a letter to county police Commissioner Thomas Dale in January, Murray cited the cuts as a reason to eliminate the headquarters tax in favor of a pay-per-use system.

“The police services have diminished over the last few years, although we are making the same financial contribution to the county for them,” said Lynbrook Village Mayor William Hendrick, who supports a review of the headquarters tax and alternatives. “If we cannot reestablish the level of services we expect, then Mayor Murray’s suggestion is a viable alternative.”

Nassau is reducing the size of its police force and on May 1 launched its controversial police reorganization plan to downgrade four of eight police precincts.

Rockville Centre’s attorney is researching the options open to the village to fight the tax, Murray said.

“I love the police force, but I only want to do what is right for our residents,” he said.

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Nassau County villages with their own police departments
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- Garden City
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- Hempstead
- Kingspoint
- Lake Success
- Lynbrook
- Malverne
- Muttontown
- Old Brookville
- Covers five other villages: Brookville, Upper Brookville, Matinecock, Mill Neck, Cove Neck
- Old Westbury
- Oyster Bay Cove
- Port Washington
- Also covers Baxter Estates Village and other areas
- Rockville Centre
- Sands Point

Some say they’re not getting their money’s worth

Village officials across Nassau County, trying to reduce the tax burden on homeowners, say they are fed up with paying for county police services they rarely use.

Led by Rockville Centre Mayor Francis Murray, they have proposed using a pay-as-you-go system in which the 18 villages with their own police departments pay only for the county services provided.

At issue is Nassau’s so-called headquarters tax paid by residents as part of their county tax bill. It covers services that village departments can’t provide, such as detectives for major crime investigations, helicopters and K-9 units. Residents outside those villages — who rely solely on county police — also pay the tax as well as another to cover the cost of routine patrol services.

The headquarters tax represents about 40 percent of the county tax bill to residents of villages with their own police departments and about 25 percent for nonvillage residents’ bills. For 2012, the tax rate was $49.347 per $100 of assessed valuation.

Residents of villages with their own forces paid $90.1 million toward the tax for 2012, according to the Nassau County Police Department. Areas outside villages paid $128.56 million.

“We don’t think we’re getting our money’s worth,” Murray said. “We don’t want to be charged for services we’re not getting.”

His initiative is unlikely to gain traction with the county, which is facing a deficit estimated to be at more than $100 million, Nassau First Deputy Commissioner Thomas C. Krumpter said the headquarters tax, which is written into the county administrative code, “is like a life insurance policy. You can’t pay for it just when you need it.”

Appeal to Mangano

The Nassau County Village Officials Association, composed of the 64 incorporated villages representing about 435,000 residents, on May 1 asked County Executive Edward Mangano to have his budget officer review the tax and to have the 2013 budget reflect a fair distribution of police taxes.

Mangano said in a statement that “the county is reviewing this [the headquarters tax] in preparation of our 2013 budget process.”

Several village mayors and police officials said they would support repealing the headquarters tax or at least reviewing it.

“We’ve always been provided with support services from the Nassau County police such as detectives and training that we can’t supply ourselves,” said Sands Point Village Police Chief Mark Mandel. “Are we getting our money’s worth? . . . I really don’t know.”

The Nassau County Legislature would have to pass a law to amend the administrative code to repeal or change the tax, county officials said.

No potential fees have been discussed for county police services that currently are provided through the headquarters tax.

Former county Comptroller Howard Weitzman reviewed the tax in 2004 and concluded taxpayers in communities with their own police forces pay “slightly” more than residents of other areas. But the review also determined that making payments more equitable would result in “minimal” savings for those village residents.