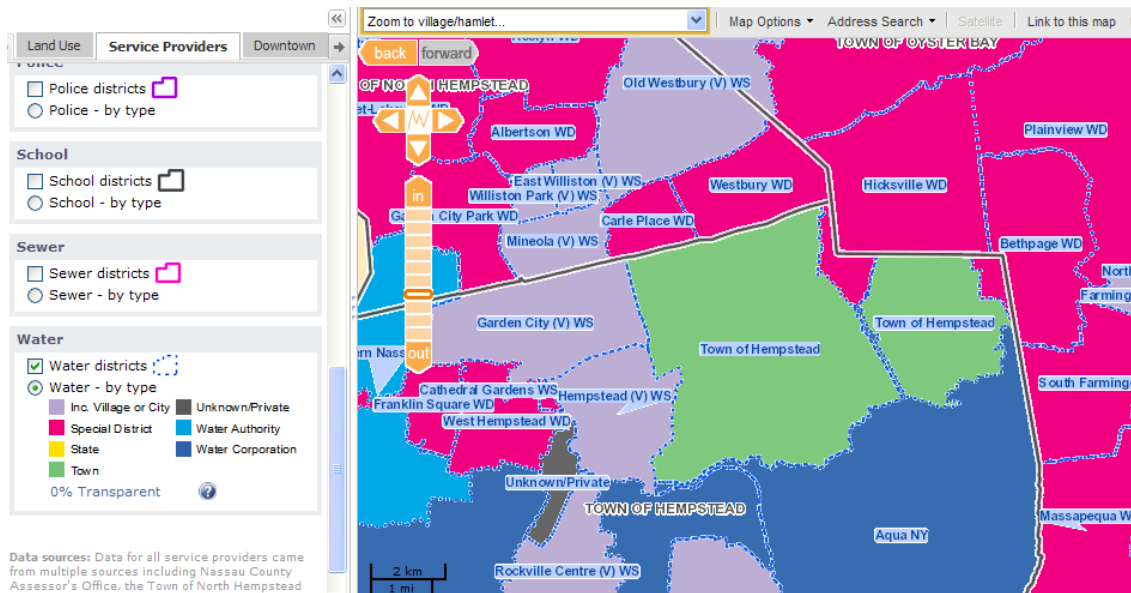


# Who Provides Services on Long Island?

## An Introduction to the Long Island Index's New Interactive Map

[www.longislandindexmaps.org](http://www.longislandindexmaps.org)

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## Government Services on Long Island: A Patchwork

More than most places, New York State has a patchwork quilt of governments providing services to taxpayers. Nowhere is this more obvious than on Long Island, with its 2 counties, 2 cities, 13 towns, 96 villages, and more than 120 school districts. In addition to these forms of local government, which most residents are familiar with, there are also library districts, fire districts and special districts providing services such as water, sewer and garbage pick-up.

A new resource developed by the Long Island Index can help residents see and better understand this patchwork quilt of service providers. The Index has developed an interactive map that displays all local government service providers associated with every address on Long Island<sup>1</sup> – including special districts. For the first time, the boundaries of all local government entities providing services are displayed in one place, along with information about how to reach the provider via telephone or Internet and when elections are held.

## Structuring Government Services

Government in New York evolved to meet the growing demands of residents as they moved out of cities and into unincorporated areas, beginning in the early 1900s. This evolution took different forms, with different types of service providers springing up to provide various services to pockets of new residents.

The different forms that exist today are:<sup>2</sup>

**Public schools:** There are five different types of school districts on Long Island; all are governed by elected school boards.

**Library:** There are municipal (city, town or village), school district and special district library systems, as well as association libraries.

**Police:** Cities and incorporated villages provide police services; in Nassau County the majority of the policing services are provided by the county. In one instance, Port Washington, there is a special district run by an elected board of commissioners.

**Fire:** Cities and incorporated villages have fire departments; fire protection is also offered through fire protection districts that contract with towns and by special districts that are independently run by their own elected boards of commissioners.

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<sup>1</sup> The Nassau County service provider map launched in June 2012; Suffolk is expected to be complete later in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix for more detailed discussion and definitions of terms.

Sewer, water, and sanitation/garbage: Cities, towns and incorporated villages can provide these services throughout their municipality or to parts of it. Additionally, some independent special districts with their own elected boards provide such services. Water is also provided by water authorities and corporations.

## What are Special Districts? It depends...

Special improvement districts occupy a particular place in the spectrum of service providers and have a unique history on Long Island. In 1928, New York State passed a law allowing for the creation of special improvement districts in Nassau County. These districts were governed by elected board of commissioners and in some cases could levy taxes and issue bonds. They allowed for making improvements (such as sewers) and providing services (fire, water) to groups of residents who wanted them and wanted to pay for them. As the NYS Comptroller described it, "A special district is a geographic area within a town established to address specific needs of the property owners within that district, utilizing charges, and, in some cases, user fees paid by taxpayers within the district to finance these services. Special districts were statutorily authorized to assist towns in adjusting to patterns of growth that were not townwide, and have been used liberally by towns over the last several decades to address increased residential needs."<sup>3</sup>

In 1932, the current Town Law was enacted, and it changed how special districts were controlled, generally abolishing separate boards of commissioners. Special districts could be created to provide services in parts of towns, but now they would be administered by Town Boards. Today, homeowner's property tax bills often contain mention of sidewalk districts, lighting districts, even in one instance an elevator district. These are all special districts that have been created to provide specific services to a specific locale and are operated by the Town.

However, when the 1932 law was passed it allowed existing commissioner-run special districts to hold votes asking residents to maintain their structure. Many of the older special districts, particularly in Nassau County, were grandfathered in when the law was passed.

Today, commissioner-led special districts primarily provide services related to water, sewer, fire protection, garbage disposal and in one case, police services. Each of these can be found on the Index maps and are listed as "special districts." When the service is provided by the town, it is simply listed as a "town" service.

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<sup>3</sup> See: [www.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/pubs/research/townspecialdistricts.pdf](http://www.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/pubs/research/townspecialdistricts.pdf).

## About Commissioner-Led Special Districts

Commissioners are elected by residents of the special districts. Election dates used to be scheduled by the individual districts and were spread out throughout the year.<sup>4</sup> To address the lack of uniformity, a new law was passed that requires most special districts to hold their elections on the second Tuesday in December.

Commissioner-led special districts levy fees and/or taxes to cover the cost of providing services. As the NYS Comptroller noted in his report, this can be confusing.

When taxpayers try to piece together how much they actually pay for special districts, it is often difficult for them to make sense of their tax and utility bills. There is no set of standard billing practices and the multiple methods for billing and collecting taxes, assessments and fees can lead to confusion. Below are some ways residents pay for townwide and special district services:

**Property Taxes and Assessments** – Most often, town residents pay for services through property taxes. Special districts and Article 12-C improvements receive portions of taxes and assessments, and residents are billed at varying rates depending on a variety of factors. Special district portions of the charges are sometimes shown on tax bills, and at other times they are billed separately.

**Special District User Fees** – Special districts often bill residents directly for services like metered water usage fees or sewer rents. These fees may appear on property tax bills but are separate from real property tax and assessment collections.

**Fees to Other Entities** – Other organizations, like water and sewer authorities, are sometimes responsible for specific service or resource delivery. For example, a water authority can provide water to municipalities on a broader regional basis and residents are billed directly.<sup>5</sup>

Providing services to residents through so many different forms of government, some with their own elected boards, others as parts of existing town governments, has advantages and disadvantages. It may allow for better tailoring services to needs of residents but it may also work against efficiency as so many units of government providing service cannot achieve the economies of scale that a larger service provider could. Certainly, Long Island residents pay some of the highest property taxes in the nation. Regional planning can also suffer as the task of coordinating so many different players becomes more difficult. Residents may wonder whether it makes sense to have multiple water providers, for example, when the water comes from a single source, Long Island's aquifers.

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<sup>4</sup> For more about this issue, see <http://www.nyslocalgov.org/pdf/suozzi2.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> See: [www.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/pubs/research/townspecialdistricts.pdf](http://www.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/pubs/research/townspecialdistricts.pdf), page 11.

Costs for similar services can vary substantially depending on the service provider. A study by former Nassau County Comptroller Howard Weitzman of special districts found significant differences that didn't appear to be driven by higher levels of service. For example, the average per-household cost of sanitation service in 2006 ranged from \$301 to \$974. While most districts picked up garbage at the curb, some offered back-door service, but even among those the average per-household cost ranged from \$371 to \$928.<sup>6</sup>

And with so many units of government and elected boards, accountability can become a problem. Voter turnout tends to be low for local elections in general, and can be even lower for elections in special districts. A few take advantage of the opportunities for fraud and abuse. Though many special districts have unblemished records, there have been cases of serious abuse.<sup>7</sup>

In 2007 – 2008, NYS Legislature appointed a commission to study local government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Entitled, *The NYS Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competition*, the testimony from those sessions and their final report are available at the website, [www.nyslocalgov.org](http://www.nyslocalgov.org).

## Developing the Service Provider Maps

Building the interactive service provider map was a daunting task that took more than a year. The Center for Urban Research at the CUNY Graduate Center worked closely with the Long Island Index to develop the maps.

There is no central source for maps outlining the boundaries of all the special districts and other service providers on Long Island. Some maps are maintained by the Nassau County geographic information system (GIS) division of the Planning Department, but these are not comprehensive and do not always reflect who provides the service (for example, the GIS division's police precinct boundaries do not indicate whether police services are provided by the county, special districts, or other levels of government). Some district maps only exist on paper. For example, one garbage district in the Town of Hempstead explained to the Center of Urban Research that no overall boundary map was maintained by their office, only lists of households serviced by each garbage pickup route. The Center obtained a 1928 blueprint map from the Town Clerk's office as the only official, extant map of this district. Another garbage district maintains a printed street map on their office wall with a hand-drawn outline of the district. The district provided a copy of the wall map that the Center used to create a GIS map of the area.

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<sup>6</sup> See: [http://www.nassaucountyny.gov/agencies/Comptroller/documents/Disparity\\_Report\\_2007-2.pdf](http://www.nassaucountyny.gov/agencies/Comptroller/documents/Disparity_Report_2007-2.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.nassaucountyny.gov/agencies/Comptroller/Docs/PDF/05Dec19-SpecDistRpt.pdf> for more of the findings in Nassau County by former Comptroller Howard Weitzman.

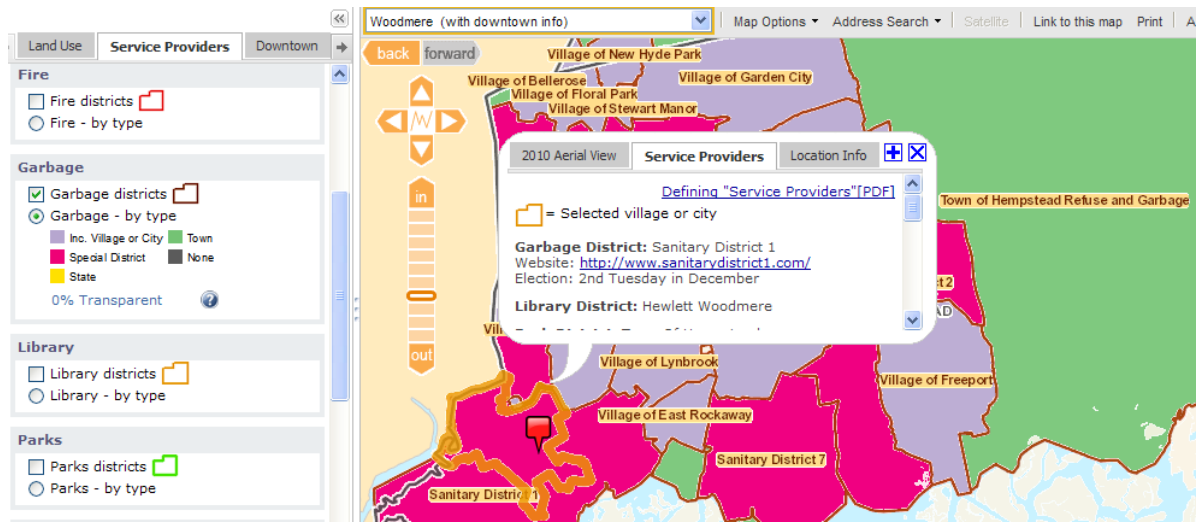
As a result, the Center and the Index needed to triangulate among several sources in order to create digital maps of all service providers in Nassau County. The primary source was a list of all properties from the Nassau County tax assessor's office that identified all the special taxes paid by each property and the service provider receiving those taxes. When matched with the GIS file of tax parcel boundaries, this information would help visualize the extent of each special district. But even this approach was neither complete nor perfect. For various reasons some properties do not appear on the assessor's list for certain districts, even though those properties may receive services from the district.

So the project also examined reference maps such as those available at the Long Island Water Conference's website ([www.liwc.org/pages/memberMap.htm](http://www.liwc.org/pages/memberMap.htm)) or the New York State Library system's website ([www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/libs/publibs/nls.htm](http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/libs/publibs/nls.htm)). These are drawn generally and not in a digital format that could be integrated directly with the special district GIS maps being developed by the Center. But they provided a helpful reference against which to compare the parcel-based analysis and other descriptive information about special districts. Finally, the Long Island Index staff reached out to many districts directly via websites and individual interviews to clarify and cross-check the mapped boundaries.

The process of building the maps was painstaking. At the time of release, the map is already a rich resource, but because of the complexity and volume of data, there may be errors. The Long Island Index will make corrections as needed.

## Using the Maps

The map allows a homeowner to see all the service providers adding to his or her tax bill. Enter your address and a window pops up with a "service providers" tab listing service providers with additional information collected by Long Island Index staff members, such as website, contact information and election dates.



The map can also be used to get a picture of what types of service are provided by different kinds of entities. Click on “Garbage – by type,” for example, and the map shows village and city providers in purple, special districts in pink and towns in green – showing that town garbage service is more prevalent in the eastern part of the county, while special district service is more common in western Nassau. This feature can facilitate community discussion among taxpayers and policymakers about the benefits and disadvantages of the current, multi-layered approach to service delivery.

An Excel spreadsheet is also available from the site that lists all the information found on the maps.

## Considering New Approaches

Communities throughout New York State have begun discussions about whether they need or want so many units of local government. Spurred by state funding, they are looking at options ranging from dissolving governments, to consolidating two or more governments, to keeping structures in place but developing ways to provide shared services from two or more governments.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo led an effort to increase residents’ power to drive such discussions, gaining passage of the Government Reorganization and Citizen Empowerment Act in 2009. The law allows residents to place questions of consolidating or dissolving units of local government on the ballot by collecting signatures from 10% of voters in the local government, or 5,000 signatures, whichever is less. If approved, a plan for consolidation or dissolution must be adopted.

Statewide, since the law was enacted, there have been 13 votes to dissolve villages and only one was approved (another petition effort was successfully challenged so no vote occurred). Votes to consolidate or dissolve special districts haven’t been tracked statewide, but there have been at least a handful of fire district mergers since the law passed, including the 2011 merger of the Lonelyville and Fair Harbor Fire Districts in Suffolk County. Currently in Nassau, two citizen groups have been gathering signatures to try to dissolve a sanitation district.<sup>8</sup>

Such efforts and discussions are sure to continue, as local governments and taxpayers face financial pressures. The development of new resources such as the service provider map will help inform these discussions and hopefully lead to solutions that taxpayers and service providers can embrace.

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<sup>8</sup> For more about this effort see, [www.fixmypropertytaxes.com](http://www.fixmypropertytaxes.com).

# APPENDIX

## Defining our Terms

### Fire

There are 70 fire service providers in Nassau County. There are five different structures for these districts.

**Fire Protection districts** (15 in total) are incorporated organizations where the towns negotiate the fire contract with the district. There are no commissioners; the district is a membership organization. There are no public elections.

**Special districts** (32 in total) are commissioner run districts where the voters elect the commissioners through public elections and the commissioners set the budget.

**Village fire departments** (19) and **city fire departments** (2) are run by their local jurisdictions; staffs are village or city employees; budgets are included in the village or city budgets. There are no public elections for fire department commissioners or budgets only for village or city elected officials.

There are two **Water Districts** in Nassau that also provide Fire services. In structure, these water districts function similarly to Special Districts.

For more on the structure of fire departments, see:  
[http://www.nyslocalgov.org/pdf/Fire\\_Protection\\_in\\_NYS.pdf](http://www.nyslocalgov.org/pdf/Fire_Protection_in_NYS.pdf)

### Garbage

There are two aspects to garbage services: collection and disposal. Most districts provide both services; in some cases, the services are divided between two different providers.

There are 47 **villages and 2 cities** that provide their own garbage collection and disposal services or contract with a private collector.

There are 10 **special districts**; 5 provide collection and disposal services and 5 provide only collection services.

The **Towns** of Hempstead, North Hempstead and Oyster Bay provide either collection and disposal or collection only or disposal only services to different communities within their jurisdictions.

There are 6 villages that have **no garbage service** provided by the village or the town or special district. Home owners contract with private collectors for garbage collection and disposal.



## Libraries

There are 54 library service providers in Nassau County. While there are 17 different types of public libraries in New York State, four types are used in Nassau. They are Association Libraries (5 libraries), School District Public Libraries (33 libraries), Special District Public Libraries (5 libraries), and Public Village Libraries (11 libraries). This is how each is structured.

	<b>Association Library</b>	<b>School District Public Library</b>	<b>Special District Public Library</b>	<b>Public Village Library</b>
<b><i>How Established</i></b>	By vote of association members or as trustees operating under a will or deed of trust	By vote of school district voters.	By special act of State legislature and vote of special district voters.	By vote of village board, or by petition and referendum.
<b><i>Tax Funds</i></b>	Receive appropriation from units of government or by vote of municipal or school district voters.	Budget approved by school district voters.	Budget approved by district voters.	Budget approved by village board. Also tax levy by vote of village or school district voters. May petition village and/ or school district tax payers for funds.
<b><i>Bonding Authority</i></b>	Not permitted. Requires a special act of legislation through NYS.	School district may bond if it owns the library building.	A municipality may bond on behalf of district if legislation allows.	Village may bond if it owns the library building.
<b><i>Civil Service</i></b>	Employees not covered.	Employees subject to Civil Service Law.	Employees subject to Civil Service Law.	Employees subject to Civil Service Law.
<b><i>Community Involvement</i></b>	Public can join association and may vote for trustees.	Public “owns” library and votes directly for trustees and budget.	Public “owns” library and votes directly for trustees and budget.	Public “owns” library; votes for elected officials who are sympathetic to library needs.

## Police

**Nassau County** provides police services to a large portion of the region. In addition 19 **villages** provide their own policing services within the boundaries of their jurisdiction. There is 1 **special district** in Nassau County providing police services.

## Parks

Parks are managed by a variety of governmental entities: State, Towns, Villages and Cities (Nassau County no longer manages any Parks). Typically the parks are open to anyone who lives within the boundaries of the managing jurisdiction: a North Hempstead resident can typically use any park run by North Hempstead, for example. In addition in Nassau County there are parks where the residents of a specified district are taxed for the cost of running the park.

There are 22 **park districts** governed by Town Board members; in 8 access to facilities is restricted to residents of the district, in 14 access is open to all Town residents.

There are 2 **special districts** which are governed by elected commissioners and access is restricted to residents of the district.

## Public Parking

Public parking is provided in different locations by the county, the towns, the villages and the cities. Additionally, there are 17 public parking taxing districts in Nassau County. All are governed by Town Board members; access to the facilities varies – some are only open to residents of the district, others are available to residents outside the district as well.

## School Districts

There are 56 school districts in Nassau County and 68 in Suffolk County. There are five different district structures on Long Island.

**Common School Districts** represent the original type of school district. Today there are only 11 left in New York State, four of them on Long Island. By law, they may not operate high schools, and therefore must contract with neighboring districts to provide secondary education.

Ninety-seven of our districts, 78%, are **Union Free School Districts**. This indicates that they were formed from the “union” of multiple common school districts, “free” from the restrictions that had barred them from operating high schools.

**Central School Districts** are the most common type in New York State, but only 22 are found on Long Island. These were formed through the consolidation of common, union free, and/or central school districts. In general the laws governing their structure are the same as union free school districts.

We have three **Central High School Districts**, which provide secondary education to students in two or more common or union free districts.

We have two **City School Districts**: Glen Cove and Long Beach.

## Sewer

There are two aspects to sewer services: collection and treatment. Most districts provide both services; in some cases, the services are divided between two different providers.

**Nassau County** provides collection and treatment services to the majority of the communities in the county.

There are 5 **special districts** providing collection and treatment services.

One **city** and 3 **villages** provide collection and treatment services; 6 **villages** provide their own collection service and the County provides treatment services.

The **state** provides both services for Jones Beach. In one case, Lido Beach, collection is provided by the County but treatment is provided by the City of Long Beach.

## Water Districts

There are 40 water districts in Nassau County.

One district is run by the **State of New York**; one district is run by the **Town of Hempstead**; two districts are run by **cities**; 12 districts are run by **villages**. In each of these cases the district's budget is incorporated in the budget of the municipality in which the district resides. There are no elections for commissioners or votes for budgets; the only elections are for municipal elected officials.

There are 19 **special districts** which are commissioner run districts and the voters elect the commissioners through public elections and the commissioners set the budget.

There are 3 **private corporations** providing water services in Nassau County. Residents of these districts are billed directly by the corporation for their water usage.

There are 2 **water authorities** in Nassau County. A water authority is a corporate governmental agency governed by a Board of Directors whose members are usually elected officials from the towns/villages that are within the water authorities' boundaries.