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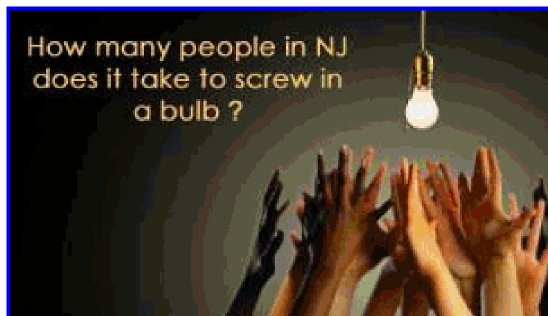
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Courage to Change



The problems associated with NJ’s municipalities replicating services can be compared to the concept of redundancy in the private sector.

Corporate elimination of redundancy, initiated in the 1980s, is now generally accepted as the preferred method for turning around declining organizations, cutting costs, and improving performance.

[Courage to ConnectNJ](#), a non-profit organization seeking to reduce the replication of services in NJ, announced their opening of a Bergen County chapter during a forum held at Bergen Community College.

With a goal to energize, enlighten and engage citizens in the effort to eliminate redundancy throughout

Bergen County, Courage to ConnectNJ enlisted a panel of experts and civic leaders to lead a discussion on the future of municipal governance in Bergen County. Gina Genovese, the executive director, moderated the forum and began with a summary of NJ's ranking as the state with the highest tax burden; detailing how the replication of services offered by NJ's 566 municipalities is a major factor.

The only recent municipal consolidation in New Jersey took place in 1952, so one of the organization's goals is to encourage additional studies to examine if cost savings can be realized in today's economic environment. In place of a working model, the forum offered Woodbridge, NJ as an example of a township that can embrace diverse neighborhoods and populations into one municipality. (Woodbridge is identified, for census and practical purposes, as 10 unincorporated areas - townships that never fractured into incorporated municipalities.)

Two of the main speakers hailed from Woodbridge, Mayor John McCormac and School Superintendent John Crowe. McCormac spoke to the savings realized by all the residents operating under one entity, and the ability to maintain distinct neighborhoods with respect to fire departments, libraries, VFWs, and other characteristics often associated with the face of a community. He emphasized that had the townships fractured, there would be a replication of 9 other governments with the associated services. This would have led to higher taxes, and the inability of Woodbridge to offer additional services and facilities that smaller towns do not have resources to provide.

Superintendent Crowe spoke to the quality of education in Woodbridge, the shared services between the town and the Board of Ed, and addressed the emotional challenges faced by those who might need to relinquish some elements of control in an effort to provide better services.

While Mayor McCormac was adamant that towns maintain their own governing body and seek out shared services between other municipalities and their own board of education, Superintendent Crowe was receptive to benefits that could come from areas of consolidation with respect to school districts. This thought was echoed by the moderator Gina Genovese who pointed to high schools needing to involve themselves in the development of curriculum to assure middle school students are prepared upon graduation.

The philosophical difference segued into the second portion of the panel which focused on municipal consolidation itself. Many economic analysts, including panelist Reagan Burkholder, believe that municipal consolidation may be a solution for some of New Jersey's 566 towns.

Burkholder's presentation overlapped between the benefits of consolidation and the benefits of shared services, with an emphasis on expenditures for local police departments. The public safety budget item is one of the largest items for all 566 municipalities in New Jersey. Burkholder offered an analysis of savings that could be realized through police department mergers; he also pointed to other options in America where suburban towns rely on county police who are dedicated to a particular town and utilize cars and uniforms distinct to that municipality.

Andrew Bruck, co-author of "Overruled by Home Rule", provided some historical context on home rule and efforts to consolidate dating back into the 1800s. He is also the person who compiled a simplified process for citizens seeking to establish commissions in their town to study consolidation. The forms and guides are available online at CourageToConnectNJ.org. The 6 step process outlines how an average citizen can begin the process of having a study commissioned to examine cost benefits that can be achieved through consolidation.

Pat Schuber, former Bergen County Executive, was the final speaker who melded the two approaches between consolidation and shared services. He emphasized that larger is not always better, but examining

the options is integral to maintaining some semblance of affordability in Bergen County. He spoke of the need to raise public awareness and engagement, and used an existing program to emphasize the lack of concentration on some of the largest issues. Specifically, Schuber pointed to a program piloted by the Bergen County Prosecutor's office that would pay for a study on police department mergers for municipalities: only a handful of towns have sought to have a study done.

CourageToConnectNJ.org has held previous events in Bergen County, but has had limited success with engaging elected officials. Northvale and Park Ridge were noted as two towns that have aggressively sought to involve their residents in the process of promoting shared services.

Bruck in his presentation offered examples of a historical interest in consolidation; and, shared services has been a buzz word for NJ politicians over numerous election cycles. Still, the problem of replicating services continues to plague NJ's 566 municipalities.

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