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Assembly passes bill to let Cherry Hill, Merchantville study a merger

By Edward Colimore
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A measure that would clear the way for Cherry Hill Township officials and a Merchantville citizens group to study merging the municipalities was unanimously approved by the state Assembly on Monday.

The bill, which unanimously passed the Senate last month, will now go to Gov. Christie.

The legislation's backers, members of a grassroots organization, Merchantville Connecting for the Future, have been exploring a merger for about a year as a way of eliminating duplicated administrative bodies and saving money.

This action "lends more flexibility," said Greg La Vardera, a Merchantville resident and member of the citizens group. "It removes one more barrier, making it easier for smaller and larger municipalities to study consolidation."

The group's earlier efforts - which included petitions with hundreds of signatures - were thwarted in December when the state Department of Community Affairs (DCA) rejected an application to take the first step toward consolidation.

New Jersey's Local Option Consolidation Act does not allow for a "hybrid application" resulting from the action of the governing body of one municipality and a citizens group from another municipality, said officials with the state's local finance board of the DCA's Division of Local Government Services. The statute requires the participation of two governing bodies or two committees representing registered voters. A committee is required to have petitions signed by at least 10 percent of the voters in the most recent general election.

Members of Merchantville Connecting for the Future and Courage to Connect New Jersey, a nonprofit organization that encourages consolidations, began working with lawmakers to seek a legislative remedy.

"It's a great day for New Jersey because it allows citizens and local officials to work together - and that's what we need," said Gina Genovese, executive director of Courage to Connect New Jersey, a nonprofit group that encourages consolidations and has been working with Merchantville residents.

"There are 566 municipalities across New Jersey, and there are a lot of mayors who don't want to give up their jobs," she said. "This allows citizens in one town and officials in another to work together."

Genovese said the passage of the legislation "shows the power of the voice of the people. Any time you have more options, it's easier to get things done," she said.

Merchantville long ago was part of Delaware Township, which became Cherry Hill in 1961 after a name-changing, nonbinding referendum. It was incorporated as a borough in 1874 by an act of the Legislature.

Hoping to possibly reunite the communities, Merchantville Connecting for the Future worked to collect signature petitions in favor of the merger and met with Cherry Hill officials.

The newly passed legislation would ensure the DCA's Local Finance Board will not reject an application when one municipality obtains approval by petition and another obtains approval by resolution.

Merchantville residents said they will resubmit their application with petition signatures to the DCA, form a commission with Cherry Hill, and seek state or private funds to pay for a consultant's study on the feasibility of consolidation. Based on those finding, they would propose or reject a consolidation referendum.

"This could be the first time that consolidation has ever been citizen-driven," Genovese said. "I've studied this in England, New Zealand, Japan, Germany, and Denmark. It's usually driven from the top down, not from the bottom up. But that's the case here, and it's wonderful."

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