

GOVERNMENT

To Alleviate Financial Burden, Township Consolidation Might Be Key

Courage to Connect NJ aims to consolidate township without compromising community identity.

By **Maryrose Mullen** March 3, 2011

Courage to Connect NJ, a non-profit organization that advocates the consolidation of some of some of New Jersey's 566 municipalities, held a public forum at Brunner Elementary School on Wednesday night. Co-founders Gina Genovese and Wendy McCahill spoke of how having multiple townships operate under a single governing body could lead to a more efficient, cohesive state.

The non-partisan organization only visits towns where they are invited. Genovese emphasized that it was not Courage to Connect NJ's place to tell communities who or what they should merge with, but merely to start the serious conversation on the topic.

"We need to look at ourselves and ask, 'are we helpless,'" she said. "Is there nothing we can do besides pay more and more in taxes? Most importantly, we need to ask if it's necessary to have 566 municipal structures."

The concept of township consolidation is not a new one. Genovese presented a New York Times article about a possible merger of the Oranges dating back to 1895. The city physician of the time stated that, "there's no other course to be pursued. The Oranges must be made into one city so that all our public departments may be better and more economically managed. It is only selfishness that has kept us apart." Coincidentally, 1895 is the same year that Scotch Plains and Fanwood became two separate townships.

"If we don't look at the state of New Jersey differently and understand that we are all part of this and paying for this, then nothing is going to change," Genovese said. "If we don't look at communities and towns differently because we feel we're going to lose our identity or control, then nothing will change."

Genovese believes that consolidation of municipalities will help lessen the tax burden on New Jersey residents, as well dramatically decreasing the financial burden on the municipalities themselves. This is especially relevant to residents of Union County, who boast the third highest income property taxes in the country at 8.7 percent. (The first and second spots belong to Essex and Passaic counties.)

Genovese, the former mayor of Long Hill, used her own town as an example of how a single community shouldering the weight of a government would only prove to be a detriment.

"I was Mayor of a town of 9000 people," she said. "We had 3100 households paying for a single administrative structure. I felt the town should not exist by itself."

Long Hill attempted to share services with neighboring townships, but the effort further fractured an already fractured system. With shared services, each contract with an individual town is often for a different, singular service that is not shared with any other municipality.

"We're treating the effects, and not the causes," she said.

The prime example that Courage to Connect uses to promote consolidation is Woodbridge Township, the state's oldest town. Woodbridge has a single governing body presiding over 10 distinct communities such as Fords, Avenel, Colonia, and Iselin. The structure has led to a variety of advantages, including a state of the art television studio, a full time economic development and redevelopment officer, and a full time grant writer, who nets the township up to \$12 million a year in grants. Recently, Woodbridge received a grant for nine million dollars in order to install solar panels on schools.

"When you have resources and power," Genovese said, "you can start doing more things to make your town thrive. Woodbridge has one superintendent for 10 townships; in Union county, we have 6."

Because Woodbridge pays for one governing body, one police department, and one department of public works, they are able to keep their municipal budget at \$60 million. In comparison, the separate townships of New Providence, Berkley Heights, Summit, Springfield, Westfield, and Mountainside aggregate budgets of \$98 million.

A major concern regarding consolidation is the communities fear that merging with another township will compromise its individual identity. Genovese states that while townships fall beneath the Woodbridge umbrella, townships have not lost their distinctness. Iselin sports one of the most diverse communities in the state, while Colonia annually celebrates 'Colonia Pride Day.' Consolidation, according to Courage to Connect NJ, creates a better, fiscally efficient environment for multiple areas while allowing areas to remain unique.

Genovese also addressed the need of residents to drop the stigma of merging with, 'those people.' "If the people of New Jersey hope to alleviate some of their fiscal troubles, they must be willing to cooperate with neighbors.

"This is Jersey," she said with a laugh, "and the dirt means something. But we need to stop thinking in terms of 'us and those people.' If we keep that mentality, New Jersey isn't going anywhere."



PHOTOS (4)



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COMMENTS (6)

fanhood

8:42pm on Thursday, March 3, 2011

Who's that guy in the pics?



Brett g Porter

9:17pm on Thursday, March 3, 2011

No mention of how many were in attendance. Any Patch regulars there?

Tommy Taxpayer

9:59pm on Thursday, March 3, 2011

About 30 people in attendance. I thought the presentation was outstanding and economic very persuasive. I believe that the website has a booklet that provides an overview

Victoria Jensen

1:22pm on Friday, March 4, 2011

The call to action from this presentation is to submit a petition to the State for a study on merging the two towns. They will need just under 900 signatures in Scotch Plains, which should be a cinch. In Fanwood, just 293 signatures are required, but that might pose a bit more of a challenge.

Scotch Plains is on the hook for several financial obligations for which Fanwood might not want to become responsible. Among these are the Senior Housing facility, civil service police, and involvement in the boondoggle Raritan Valley Sewer Authority. In addition, Fanwood's council is unpaid, while Scotch Plains gets a small salary and paid healthcare. While I don't think there is any "them vs. us" among our two towns from a culture standpoint, I don't think a merger makes sense for Fanwood unless we can somehow be excluded from these costly obligations.

Michael Lewis

10:03pm on Friday, March 4, 2011

"Them" include my parents; blessedly I can still tease them about their (twice) remodeled Municipal Building as well as the glory of their miniature golf course!

sptxpyer

9:40pm on Friday, March 4, 2011

I'm all for saving money and sharing services but Ms Genovese is talking about consolidating multiply communities throughout all of NJ. It's "fundamental change." Our state legislature and urban affairs committee has a favorable view on consolidation- they've been working on this since 2007. (bill S24 65, 40A-65 25). Ms Genovese called taxpayers being part of a "selfish mentality, and we're afraid of "those people." Already starting with derogative comments to those of us who question the endgame. Taxpayers should be extremely cautious- we'll be giving up our voting power to other communities, and if it ends up unfair, it won't be so easy to simply undue this experiment.

In all of the state only one township consolidates: WoodbridgeTownship- which grew slowly, over many years- not a comparable example. EastWindsor/Hightown recently tried but failed.

Would this be more control to larger entities? Will our local representatives have less control as to who and where our tax dollars will go within our consolidation? Look how we've lost our state/local rights to the federal gov't and all its regulations and mandates. Are we willing too lose our local representation too? All for a few hundred dollars in savings? I think smaller gov't is best- accountable to us alone. I'm not selfish, I just don't want more "redistribution." SP/Fanwood has done a decent job of sharing services.

What was that saying? take advantage of a (economic) crisis when you can?

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