

GOVERNMENT, BUSINESS

Should New Jersey's Towns Consolidate? One Organization Says Yes

Courage to Connect New Jersey aims to encourage municipalities to consolidate to aid state's financial crisis.

By **Gerard Longo** 8:29am

Advocates for the consolidation of some of New Jersey's 566 municipalities visited the Berkeley Heights VFW at 15 Locust Avenue on Wednesday to discuss possible methods for townships to merge together and operate under a single governing body.

Gina Genovese and Wendy McCahill of Courage to Connect New Jersey, which is a grassroots consolidation initiative that is encouraging towns to consolidate, gave a presentation at the VFW that gave some insight as to how consolidation could help alleviate the current perilous financial state of New Jersey.

"Anytime you open up a paper you see the financial struggle our state is in right now," said McCahill. "We're all taxpayers, we continually see our bills go up and up, and we're all like, 'when is this going to end?'"

Genovese, a former Berkeley Heights resident and current business owner, has served in elected office in various positions, including a stint as the Mayor of Long Hill Township. She encourages anyone willing to listen to consolidation ideas to examine how such ideas could help the individual towns, as well as the state as a whole.

"We're here to do three things: we're here to take a look at the State of New Jersey differently – is it essential to have 566 municipal and administrative structures delivering local services?," said Genovese. "We're here to look at our towns and communities differently – will consolidation cost us our town identity? Lastly, we need to look at ourselves as voters and tax payers. Are we helpless? Is there nothing we can do about this?"

Genovese believes that by consolidating multiple municipalities to operate under a single governing body, the tax burden on New Jersey residents, as well as the financial burden on the municipalities themselves, will decrease dramatically.

Genovese used the example of the state of Long Hill Township during her mayoral term as an example

"Long Hill has 9,000 residents. When I saw that 3,100 households had to pay for a police department and public works, I discovered that my town is too small to exist by itself," said Genovese. "I came to that conclusion after two years, and that's where my passion for this started."

Genovese said that Long Hill attempted consolidating certain services with other municipalities, but that employing shared services complicated matters further when having to deal with contracts with several different municipalities. With shared services, each contract with an individual town is often for a different, singular service that is not shared with any other municipality.

"Shared services takes a fractured system and makes it even more fractured," said Genovese. "It makes it even more complicated."

Courage to Connect looks at a township like Woodbridge, which includes five municipalities (Avenel, Colonia, Fords, Iselin, and Woodbridge Proper) of over 15,000 people, as a successful example of consolidation under a single governing body. Since it only has to pay for one governing body, one police department, and one department of public works, the municipalities within Woodbridge Township are able to keep their municipal budget to about \$60 million total, all while attracting new businesses to the area.

This is in contrast to the separate municipalities of Berkeley Heights, New Providence, Summit, Springfield, Westfield, and Mountainside, which combine for an aggregate budget of \$114 million yearly while existing with six separate governing bodies.

Genovese also stressed that consolidation could help the property tax rate of Union County decrease. Union County's current property tax rate is an average of 8.7% of household income, which is the third highest in the nation. Likewise, consolidation in other counties could lead to lower property tax rates, which would promote economic prosperity and make it easier for businesses to enter New Jersey.

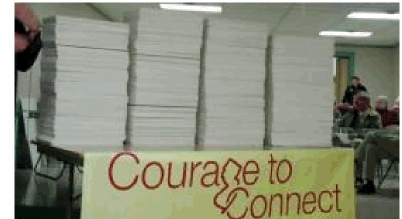
Although consolidation would mean less official governing bodies across the state, it would not necessarily mean a loss of town pride for the conjoining municipalities. According to Genovese, Colonia, Iselin, and Port Reading all have separate volunteer groups and industries within them that make them unique, despite the fact that they are all governed by Woodbridge Township.

"Every town is distinct," said Genovese.

It is important to remember, said Genovese, that consolidation can only be successful in the long-term if all involved municipalities end up "winners". For example, a town like Merchantville in Camden County, which had a population of just under 4,000 people as of the 2000 census, could benefit from consolidating with a much larger town with more resources, such as nearby Cherry Hill.

Such a plan is already in the works between the two towns, which could serve as a critical litmus test for Courage to Connect New Jersey's overall mission. Genovese believes that such a merger would be beneficial, as Cherry Hill would gain income from Merchantville while not having to spend that much more on public works projects to keep Merchantville properly maintained.

For consolidation efforts to be successful, however, the citizens of New Jersey will have to keep an open mind to the process.



PHOTOS (4)



"We need to start thinking positive; if we start overwhelming ourselves too much or start thinking negative, we're not gonna go anywhere," said Genovese.

For more information on the mission of Courage to Connect New Jersey, visit the organization's website: <http://www.couragetconnectnj.org>
(<http://www.couragetconnectnj.org/>).