



Princeton Township Mayor: Municipal consolidation will pay off

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Star-Ledger Guest Columnist

By

By Chad Goerner

For the Princetons, 2012 is the year we transition to a single municipal government, with the promise of a brighter and more sustainable future.

Our success in consolidating has set off a series of similar efforts across the state. To that end, a dynamic and energetic organization called Courage to Connect New Jersey has gathered significant momentum and is holding a conference on municipal consolidation March 28 in East Brunswick. The statewide event will build on the success that we've had in Princeton Borough and Princeton Township.

In a time when municipalities across the state are struggling to maintain the same level of service, we, in Princeton Township, have struggled to do the same while trying to keep municipal taxes low. As a result, we ended up reducing 18 percent of our staff over the past five years.

With the new 2 percent state-mandated municipal cap, many towns are facing a choice: reduce staff and cut services, or spend down their municipal surplus (i.e., savings). This is the situation that towns across the state face today. Consolidation will put our towns on a more sustainable path and allow us to bring back services that had been cut to balance the budget.

At the same time, it will save our taxpayers a significant amount of money. Princeton Borough and Princeton Township have identified \$3.2 million in annual savings at the full implementation of our consolidation plan. These



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Princeton Township Municipal Complex in a file photo.

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savings are from personnel reductions only. (One personnel reduction is my own, because I worked myself out of a job, too.)

Personnel savings of \$3.2 million is significant, for it represents about 6 percent of our combined municipal budgets. However, there's an opportunity to save even more by combining operating budgets and eliminating duplicative contracted services (municipal audits, software licensing fees, office equipment, etc.).

Before its successful passage at the voting booth last November, municipal consolidation had been something we tried almost every decade since the 1950s — each effort ending up getting voted down in Princeton Borough. When I first ran for office in 2006, I researched the past failed efforts and began a campaign for office that focused on consolidation.

My effort was aided by the passage of the Local Option Municipal Consolidation Act in 2007 that offered additional flexibility in studying consolidation, sharing debt and preserving neighborhood character — all issues that contributed to the previous failures of consolidation in the Princetons.

Armed with the assistance of this new law, the governing bodies accepted a proposal to study municipal consolidation or shared services for our police and public works departments. Part of this proposal integrated elected officials and citizen representatives into the study commission to build a broad coalition of support. In addition, we hired an independent consultant to take an objective look at our municipal budgets and take the emotional issues out of the equation.

We held more than 50 neighborhood meetings and meetings with various stakeholder organizations across the community. All of this contributed to consolidation's success at the polls, passing with wide margins in both communities. While issues of identity and political "home rule" have tended to undermine consolidation efforts, I believe our success has sparked a real statewide movement.

Courage to Connect New Jersey has had a tremendous amount of inquiries on how to get started and has become the informational resource to keep this momentum going. I challenge municipal officials and residents to ask where they want to be in five years: Do you want to continue the status quo of spending down surplus and/or cutting services, or do you want to put your community on a more sustainable path?

In the end, our efforts (and yours) will pay off.

I am confident that a consolidated Princeton will bring improved governance, more efficiency in the services we deliver and annual savings of \$3.2 million upon full implementation. Our future is bright. Join us.

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