

## Courage to Connect New Jersey again advocates for municipal consolidation in Pohatcong Township

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By **David Foster | The Express-Times**

Courage to Connect New Jersey started its presentation last week at Pohatcong Township Elementary School by citing an 1895 New York Times article discussing the municipal consolidation of the Oranges.

**"The Oranges must be made one city so that all our public departments may be better and more economically managed,"**

Courage to Connect New Jersey Executive Director Gina Genovese said, quoting a city physician from the article. **"It is only selfishness that keeps us apart."**

**"We have to find out if in 2012 if it is only selfishness that keeps us apart,"** Genovese told the audience of roughly 20 people, including local officials, residents and emergency squad members.

**Courage to Connect New Jersey** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit group that goes around the state educating the public about municipal consolidation. The three-year-old organization delivered a similar presentation at the end of October in **Pohatcong Township**.

Genovese did most of the talking at the lecture last week as co-founder Wendy McCahill took on the tedious task of showing the audience 566 placards representing New Jersey's municipalities from the highest to lowest in population.

McCahill then stacked a majority of the placards against a wall, leaving a handful on the table because the pile had reached the ceiling.

**"The thing that's ironic about these 566 towns is that they do 80 percent of the same thing,"** she said.



Express-Times Photo | DAVID FOSTER

Gina Genovese and Wendy McCahill, of the nonprofit Courage to Connect, spoke Wednesday night in Pohatcong Township.

**"Is there a better way to administer the business of these 566 towns?"**

Genovese, a former mayor of Long Hill Township, N.J., said she understands the stresses of having to try to deliver services to residents with the financial situation of the state.

**"Every day when you're an elected official, you're asked one question,"** Genovese said, adding 100 percent of the state's income tax goes to municipal and school aid. **"What are you going to do about my property taxes?"**

The presentation did not come without criticism, as one man in attendance predicted a move to socialism if municipalities continue to consolidate their services, "forcing one big government."

Courage to Connect does not try to tell officials with which municipalities to merge, Genovese said.

**"I do not believe any town should do this unless people want to do it,"** she said. **"When the state talks about forced consolidation, I get upset."**

**Steps for consolidation**

The group did, however, suggest Alpha, Phillipsburg and the townships of Greenwich, Pohatcong and Lopatcong as possible candidates for **consolidation**. The group also outlined for residents the process to initiate consolidation.

The steps include:

- Organizing
- Preparing an application to create a study commission
- Obtaining approval for the commission through petition
- State approval of the commission
- Recommending consolidation through the commission
- Obtaining local approval for consolidation through referendum

Organizers would need signatures from 10 percent of the voters in the last general assembly election to form a commission, according to Genovese. That translates into 245 signatures from Phillipsburg, 107 from Lopatcong, 84 from Greenwich, 62 from Pohatcong and 58 from Alpha.

Genovese said she considers the biggest obstacles facing possible consolidation to be the loss of town identity, loss of control and residents -- "those people" she called them -- from one municipality who do not want to merge with another.

**"If this is the attitude that you have and if we don't believe we're all in this together and if we don't believe we'll get out of this together, then New Jersey is not going to move forward,"** she said.

**"The last time I looked, 'those people' were looking for good schools, safe streets and lower taxes,"** McCahill added.

## Local leaders react

**Alpha Mayor Ed Hanics** discussed some of his concerns about consolidation, which included loss of identity and job loss.

**"No one wants to see anyone lose their job in our community,"** he said. **"Because in tight communities, such as Alpha and Pohatcong, everybody knows one another. That is a very, very negative drive."**



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Pohatcong Township  
Mayor James Kern III

Retraining people for a different job could be a solution, Genovese said. Pohatcong Mayor **James Kern III**, who invited the group to make its presentation, took a different stance than Hanics.

**"Who you ultimately work for in a small municipality is the taxpayer and not the township employee,"** Kern said later about his responsibility as an elected official. **"We need to provide the best solution for the taxpayer and save the most amount of money."**

Kern said he plans to invite Courage to Connect New Jersey back for another presentation in spring, after which he hopes to petition for consolidation.

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