



Everything Jersey

## New Jersey towns need to come together to survive

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By **Star-Ledger Guest Columnist****By Andrew Bruck**

For years, New Jersey's towns have been struggling to stay afloat, and they're about to get hit with a tidal wave. The real question is whether the state Legislature will throw them a lifeline.

Local officials are starting to prepare their annual budgets — the first since Gov. Chris Christie imposed his 2 percent property tax cap — and it's clear that dramatic changes are near. Some communities will find the only way to avoid bankruptcy is to eliminate their local administration and merge with neighboring towns.

It is well-documented that the Garden State has too much local government. With 566 municipalities crammed between the Hudson and the Delaware, New Jersey has more towns than California and more towns per capita than any other state in the country. This fractured system leads to redundancy, waste and — ultimately — sky-high property taxes.

For more than a century, state lawmakers have been talking about ways to encourage municipal consolidation. Yet since 1952, just one pair of towns has merged.

At Courage to Connect New Jersey, a nonpartisan organization that focuses on encouraging municipal mergers, we have watched numerous towns try to consolidate, only to see them stumble on unexpected roadblocks.

With the state on the brink of bankruptcy, the Legislature must pass a "consolidation toolkit" to make it easier for towns to join together. This toolkit should include:

- An expanded role for citizens: Residents must be engaged. The Legislature should make it easier for voters to initiate merger proceedings — even when local elected officials balk. Senate bill 2465, co-sponsored by Sens. Robert Gordon and James Beach, is a great start: It would allow voters in one town to team up with the governing body of a neighboring town to create a consolidation "study commission." The bill has sailed through the Legislature, which is a promising sign of their commitment to this issue. A good next step would be to allow voters to directly petition the state for a consolidation, thus bypassing mayors and councils who try to block reform.
- A consolidation "Race to the Top": Trenton continues to subsidize small towns with generous state aid. Why not

redirect this money to encourage mergers? The state should escrow all aid for towns with fewer than 10,000 residents, and then distribute it on a first-come, first-served basis to municipalities that move toward consolidation. If a town initiates a consolidation study commission, it gets back half of its state aid. If a town actually completes a consolidation, it gets a grant equal to three times its withheld state aid. These financial incentives would encourage competition for funding and jump-start the consolidation process.

- Streamlined mergers for towns with fewer than 10,000 residents: Trenton needs to create a simple, streamlined procedure for clusters of small towns that want to merge. In 1995, the Legislature adopted an expedited process for municipalities with fewer than 500 residents. This law could be amended and updated to facilitate mergers for towns with fewer than 10,000 residents.
- A consolidation of the consolidators: At least three state entities have jurisdiction over municipal consolidations. The process designed to make our towns more efficient isn't very efficient itself. The Legislature should cut through the bureaucracy and shift all consolidation responsibilities to a single commission.

New Jersey needs bold, creative solutions to help municipalities cope with the new tax cap. So far, the debate has been limited to "shared services," which is a step in the right direction but falls short of real reform. With a tidal wave about to hit, the only way to protect these communities is to help them to link arms while they weather the storm.

*Andrew Bruck is the co-author of "Overruled by Home Rule," a legal and historical overview of municipal consolidation in New Jersey, and the "Courage to Connect NJ Guidebook," a step-by-step citizen's guide to consolidation.*

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