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Lawmakers should approve bill to allow resolutions and petitions in applying for merger studies.

Not just in New Jersey, but all around the nation, local and county governments short on funds and struggling to weather the recession, are looking at sharing services with neighbors and consolidating.

Here in New Jersey, the capital of home rule and government fragmentation -- 566 municipal governments and 600-plus school districts -- there are plenty of opportunities for consolidations and regionalized services. Currently, officials from across Camden County are meeting regularly to plot how a countywide police force could be formed to save money for towns large and small.

In Trenton, legislators' job is to knock down roadblocks, to make it easier for those towns and districts that want to share certain departments or combine everything, to move forward. Towns and school districts need help from the state in researching whether consolidation makes sense and help in making sure consolidation is a money-saver, which it should be in most cases since overhead is being reduced.

To that end, we applaud state Sens. James Beach, D-Camden, and Robert Gordon, D-Bergen, who have put forward legislation to more easily enable residents and elected officials to get funding from the state for formal consolidation studies.

Rigid decision

Late last year, the state Department of Community Affairs formally declined to study a merger between adjoining Cherry Hill and Merchantville,

where a group of Merchantville residents are pushing for consolidation.

Why would the DCA reject such a study? The DCA cited a technicality in the state's Municipal Consolidation Act. The act allows local elected bodies to ask the DCA for such a study or residents to petition for such a study. In the Merchantville-Cherry Hill case, Merchantville residents signed a petition and the Cherry Hill township council offered its stamp of a approval through a resolution.

The DCA said to do a study, it needs either petitions from both towns or local government approval from both towns. It can't be a petition from residents in one town and a government resolution in another.

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It's a nonsense reason to shoot down a merger study, particularly here, where a petition drive in tiny Merchantville -- population 3,800 -- is doable, but becomes far more difficult in sprawling Cherry Hill -- population 70,000. Valid petitions need signatures from registered voters equal to at least 10 percent of the people who voted in that town in the last legislative general election.

The legislation, S2465, from Beach and Gordon, would amend the Municipal Consolidation Act so that a combination of resident petitions and town council/committee resolutions can constitute a valid application for a merger study.

This ought to be the way.

Get the facts

In all municipalities, but particularly in smaller municipalities in New Jersey, there are going to be politicians and residents ardently against consolidation. It's natural in a state where there are so many tiny municipal and school jurisdictions and consolidating means some small-town politicians would lose power.

While opposition is normal and very much part of the democratic process, neither proponents nor opponents of consolidation are helped by an absence of facts. Thorough, formal consolidation studies are the one way to show exactly how much money can be saved by a merger and what exactly would need to be done to pull off a merger. Having those facts in hand is the key for residents voting on the issue to make the right decision about consolidation.

When the DCA won't approve studies, the facts aren't available. Then, important decisions are made based on guesswork and emotion.

We applaud this bill from Gordon and Beach and another piece of legislation, S2464, they've proposed to ensure that businesses in merged towns won't be hit with immediate tax rate

increases. Homeowners already have this protection.

Both bills are needed alterations to existing law and ought to be swiftly approved.

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