



Everything Jersey

## A sign that's needed from the state: Merge

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By **Star-Ledger Editorial Board**

Quietly, history is being made in South Jersey: Activists from Merchantville, a Camden County nook of 3,800 people, soon will become the state's first citizens to initiate a municipal merger — that is, if New Jersey officials eventually get out of the way.

Citing a dusty 2007 law, the Merchantville residents collected signatures on a petition requesting a study on a possible merger with Cherry Hill, its massive neighbor with 70,000 residents. The Cherry Hill Council passed a resolution, welcoming the idea.



Star-Ledger File Photo

State Sen. Robert Gordon has proposed legislation that will make municipal consolidations easier.

In August, the group submitted an application to the Department of Community Affairs, but the agency rejected it last week. Officials said the law allows petitions from each town or a resolution from both councils, but no mixing-and-matching. State Sen. Robert Gordon (D-Bergen) has proposed new legislation that permits the a la carte approach.

"The purpose of the original law was to allow citizens the ability to step over mayors and councils who only want to protect their turf," Gordon said. "We just never foresaw this stumbling block (one petition, one resolution), so we need to fix it."

If the bill passes, as expected, next month, the Merchantville group will resubmit its application.

The Merchantville activists see trouble ahead: State aid is shrinking, the town surplus has evaporated and costs are spiraling. Hamlets are quaint, but, as money tightens, they don't make financial sense.

New Jerseyans appear open to merging. A Rutgers-Eagleton poll last spring found that 54 percent support consolidation, while 70 percent believed mergers wouldn't negatively impact services. Meanwhile, Gov. Chris Christie — while saying he can kick a football from his Mendham home to the next town — curiously has been silent on mergers, which make sense in a thinly carved state of 566 municipalities.

Christie has said the state doesn't have money to provide incentives for towns that want to merge, but this would be a wise investment.

The Legislature should pass Gordon's bill and allow Merchantville and Cherry Hill to proceed with its potential alliance. Christie should hail them as trailblazers.

Maybe it will spur more citizens to take action and force turf-protecting governing bodies to get off their duffs.

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