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Kevin Riordan: Merchantville-Cherry Hill merger more 'Twist' than waltz



By Kevin Riordan

Inquirer Columnist

The most recent municipal merger in New Jersey - between Vineland Borough and Landis Township in 1952 - was so long ago that even *this columnist* wasn't born yet.

The rarity of such civic unions is usually attributed to our state's vaguely uplifting (and decidedly expensive) tradition of "home rule."

Budget crises have renewed bipartisan talk about consolidation, but courtship is always trickiest in the early stages. It's sort of like dancing with someone for the first time.

Consider the procedural potshot Trenton took last week at the fledgling Merchantville-Cherry Hill merger, which seeks to save money by combining the compact borough of fewer than 4,000 residents and the sprawling township of 70,000.

The Department of Community Affairs ruled that a 300-signature petition from Merchantville residents and a supportive resolution by the Cherry Hill Township Council created an impermissible "hybrid" application for a consolidation study.

So it "will not be considered," sniffed the DCA's Local Finance Board, which took four months to develop its four-paragraph ruling. Such circumspect deliberations suggest how difficult consolidation may be.

'Almost comical'

"It's inconsistent . . . and a little bit confounding," says Greg LaVardera of Merchantville Connecting for the Future, the petition group. "Our interpretation is that a citizen-driven petition

and a local government-driven resolution are easily [in harmony] with the law.

"On the one side, the governor is saying they want to encourage consolidations, and on the other [his administration] is saying, 'This petition doesn't count.' I'm laughing about it because it's almost comical."

I, too, figured Gov. Christie's "cut spending or die" administration would welcome the application, perhaps by uploading another of his signature sleeves-rolled, fingers-jabbing videos to YouTube.

But the governor's office and the DCA aren't particularly forthcoming about whether there's a contradiction. You know, between supporting consolidations in principle while seeming picayune about the Merchantville-Cherry Hill application in particular.

"Mergers can be contentious issues, which makes it even more important that the clearly defined rules in place are followed," DCA public information officer Lisa Ryan said in an e-mail.

Interpreting the law

"We interpret the [municipal consolidation] law a little differently than DCA," says Gina Genovese, executive director of the nonprofit organization Courage to Connect New Jersey, which is lobbying for consolidations statewide.

"This is an issue that everyone has said for years the public is not going to go for, and here you have a group that says, 'We think we can be part of the solution.' And they were shot down," says Genovese, adding that Courage to Connect would ask the state to review the decision.

Merchantville Mayor Frank North, however, thinks DCA made the right call. "We support a study, but it shouldn't be done without the governing body being involved," he says. "Let's do this. But let's do it right."

Merchantville Connecting, the mayor adds, "is doing their own thing."

Cherry Hill's resolution did not cite "any particular entity" within Merchantville but rather indicated the township's willingness to consider consolidation, says Dan Keashen, spokesman for Mayor Bernie Platt.

"We were asked to dance, and we want to [dance] with whoever the proper entity is," he says. "If it's the governing body, fine. If it's the petitioners, fine."

With the prospective partners (and their parents in Trenton) so cautious, I won't be surprised if this dance takes awhile. Maybe another 58 years.

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