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Merchantville and Cherry Hill merger proposal hits a hurdle

By Edward Colimore

Inquirer Staff Writer

Merchantville Borough and Cherry Hill Township still may come together as one municipality, but the courtship will likely take longer than residents expected.

An application from a grassroots group of borough residents trying to take the first step toward merging the tiny municipality with its larger neighbor was rejected this week by the state Department of Community Affairs (DCA).

New Jersey's Local Option Consolidation Act does not allow for a "hybrid application" resulting from the action of the governing body of one municipality and a citizens group from another municipality, said Thomas Neff, chairman of the state's local finance board and acting director of the DCA's Division of Local Government Services, in a letter to the group Merchantville Connecting for the Future.

The application "will not be considered for that reason," Neff said.

State officials said the application did not meet statutory requirements mandating participation of two municipal governing bodies or two committees representing registered voters.

A committee is required to have petitions signed by at least 10 percent of the voters in the last general election.

The law "allows people, not just elected officials, to initiate municipal consolidation," said Bob Stocker, a member of Merchantville Connecting for the Future. It allows for creation of a commission to study consolidation "based on either a signed petition of 10 percent of the voters or a council resolution."

Stocker said his group was dumbfounded by the state's action and was working with Courage to Connect New Jersey, a nonprofit that encourages consolidation, to explore legal options.

The group had gathered 300 signatures in Merchantville, more than the number required, and

received support from the Cherry Hill mayor and council. The application was submitted in the summer and rejected Wednesday.

"The law explicitly provides towns with a lot of flexibility to undertake a consolidation study however they see fit," said Gina Genovese, executive director of Courage to Connect New Jersey.

"But rather than embracing this grassroots effort to rein in local spending, Trenton bureaucrats are standing in the way of real reform," said Genovese, former mayor of Long Hill Township, Morris County.

Merchantville long ago was part of Delaware Township, as Cherry Hill was known until 1961. It was incorporated as a borough in 1874 by an act of the Legislature.

Hoping to save money, many Merchantville residents want to be reunited with their neighbor.

Merchantville Connecting for the Future applied to form a 10-member commission - with five residents from the borough and five from Cherry Hill - to study the feasibility of a consolidation. The commission would then seek state or private funds for the work.

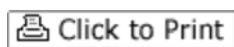
"I am really disappointed, especially with the governor talking about lowering property taxes and doing everything we can to do that," group member Lisa Kruczek said Thursday.

"We will contact members of the governor's office to let them know what's going on," she said. "We're not giving up."

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