

New Jersey's Tiniest Towns Fight Push to Merge



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

'WE'RE DIFFERENT' Paul Busch is town manager of Teterboro, N.J. A bill in the State Legislature would split Teterboro, the smallest municipality in New Jersey, among its neighbors.

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA
Published: November 26, 2010

TETERBORO, N.J. — At 1.1 square miles, this town is smaller than Central Park — smaller even than Teterboro Airport, which spills past its borders. It has no schools, no police or fire department, far more aircraft than residents, and a bone to pick with the [Census Bureau](#).

The bureau estimates Teterboro is home to 17 people, making it the smallest municipality in New Jersey. But locals say the true population is at least 50, maybe 60.

Either way, many people wonder why it is a town at all, and a bill before the State Legislature would abolish Teterboro and split the pieces among its neighbors. That bill has stalled, but the idea is not likely to go away. And many other places across the state are ripe for the same treatment.

New Jersey has long viewed its thicket of local governments, many tiny — including 566 incorporated municipalities and 591 school districts — as an instrument of cherished local control.

But a growing number of government officials and residents are starting to see these hyperlocal entities as a source of duplication and waste. With voters rebelling against high taxes, and towns and school districts struggling to absorb rising costs and falling state aid, there is a drumbeat for consolidation.

Princeton Township (population 17,000) and Princeton Borough (14,000) are studying a merger, as are Chester Township (8,000) and Chester Borough (1,600). Merchantville (population 3,700) has started to explore joining its much bigger neighbor, Cherry Hill (71,000).

Gov. [Jon S. Corzine](#) signed a 2007 law to let voters start the consolidation process with

Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com.
[Privacy Policy](#) | [What's This?](#)

Log In With Facebook

What's Popular Now

Leslie Nielsen, Hero, Then Hilarious Actor, Dies at 84



WikiLeaks Archive — Cables Uncloak U.S. Diplomacy - Interactive Feature



RECOMMEND

TWITTER

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE



MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED VIEWED

1. Your Money: A Dying Banker's Last Instructions
2. Frank Rich: Still the Best Congress Money Can Buy
3. Cables Obtained by WikiLeaks Shine Light Into Secret Diplomatic Channels
4. A Bully Finds a Pulpit on the Web
5. Hindu Group Stirs a Debate Over Yoga's Soul
6. Venice in Winter
7. The Incredible Flying Nonagenarian
8. Holiday Gift Guide: 100 Notable Books of 2010
9. Thomas L. Friedman: Got to Get This Right
10. Supreme Court Memo: Ex-Justice Criticizes Death Penalty

[Go to Complete List >](#)

MORE IN N.Y. / REGION (1 OF 16 ARTICLES)

'Spider-Man' Takes Off, With Some Bumps

[Read More >](#)



petitions, and his successor, Gov. [Chris Christie](#), has picked up the mantle. Mr. Christie said that goading local governments into considering mergers was one of his motivations for capping annual property tax increases and tying school superintendent salaries to district size; and he even argued that his hometown should combine with a neighbor.

"I live in Mendham Township, and right next door is Mendham Borough," Mr. Christie said recently. "Why isn't it just Mendham? Why do we have two administrations, two of everything?"

New Jersey's move toward consolidation is being echoed across the country. The most aggressive program is under way in Maine, where a 2007 law has cut the number of local school systems to 179 from 290, and has set a goal of reducing that figure to 80. Counties in Kentucky and Georgia have also recently combined. Iowa, meanwhile, which has far more local entities than New Jersey, has defeated several merger proposals after combining some school districts in the 1990s.

In New York, Governor-elect [Andrew M. Cuomo](#) made the issue of too many municipalities a staple of his campaign, touting the passage of a 2009 law that would streamline the process for consolidation or dissolution as his crowning legislative achievement as attorney general.

In New Jersey, the nation's most densely populated state, hundreds of towns with small populations are packed together, many of them slivers of major metropolitan areas — like Teterboro, a mere five miles from Manhattan. The idea of combining entities often meets fierce resistance: it can cost local officials their jobs or political power, and many residents see it as a loss of autonomy or identity.

In the past half-century, only one municipal merger has succeeded in New Jersey. Pahaquarry, whose [population had dwindled to fewer than a dozen](#), was absorbed into Hardwick Township in 1997.

In Merchantville, in Camden County, rumors were so widespread that Mayor Frank M. North and the council had tried to sabotage merger efforts with Cherry Hill, that in August, [Mr. North wrote an open letter disputing that idea](#).

This month, Teterboro residents voted 20 to 1 against dissolution. (Note to the Census Bureau: more than 17 people voted.) "I think the idea that you can save money has been way overstated," said Paul Busch, Teterboro's town manager. "People who say that don't understand how we operate."

Some New Jersey officials, including Stephen M. Sweeney, the Senate president, said it was more realistic to encourage towns to share services while remaining independent. "We've saved millions of dollars that way in my county," said Mr. Sweeney, who also serves as director of the Gloucester County Board of Freeholders.

But Gina Genovese, a former mayor of Long Hill (population 8,600), said that if you needed to share all sorts of services, "maybe you shouldn't have a town."

"We shared a fire inspector, a health officer, a construction officer and police communications, and we had a part-time C.F.O.," said Ms. Genovese, who founded [Courage to Connect NJ](#) to promote consolidation. "We shared services with 14 other towns, and it just took a fractured structure and fractured it even more."

Ms. Genovese's group plans to release a guide in January for towns interested in consolidating under the 2007 New Jersey law.

Supporters of consolidation say that so many entities mean too many high-priced town managers, school superintendents and other bosses, and that competition for those talents drives up their salaries. Bob Stocker, one of the organizers of the effort to absorb Merchantville into Cherry Hill, points to another concern: towns that are too small to afford professional managers.

ADVERTISEMENTS

Find your dream home with
The New York Times Real Estate



Fan The New York Times on Facebook

Watch today's top videos

See the news in the making. Watch
TimesCast, a daily news video.

THE NEW **DealB%** Essential Business
News On The Go
START NOW ►
dealbook.nytimes.com

Ads by Google

what's this?

PDF Merger & Splitter

Easily merge your PDF documents
into a single file. Free to try!

smart-pdf-tools.com

MORE IN N.Y. / REGION (1 OF 16
ARTICLES)

**'Spider-Man' Takes Off, With
Some Bumps**

[Read More »](#)

"We did away with the borough manager, and now the school principal is also the superintendent," Mr. Stocker said. "We've already harpooned all the whales. There's no way to stay independent and maintain services without much higher taxes."

Teterboro is, admittedly, an extreme example: it has two short residential streets, and most people live in town houses owned by a nonprofit corporation controlled partly by town officials and managed by the county. The town's \$5.3 million budget and staff of about two dozen people, half of them part time, are among the state's largest per capita.

That was because, said Mr. Busch, who makes \$130,000 a year as Teterboro's town manager, many of those people, like building code inspectors, work with the large number of businesses in the town. Thousands more people work in Teterboro than live there, he said, creating a healthy tax base but little need for traditional local services.

So the town contracts with neighbors for services like schools, law enforcement and firefighting. Property tax rates are relatively low — \$0.983 per \$100 of assessed value compared with immediate neighbors' taxes, which are as high as \$3.458 in South Hackensack. Mr. Busch worries that consolidation could mean higher taxes, driving away employers.

"Teterboro was formed to be a business community, not a regular town," he said. "We're different."

A version of this article appeared in print on November 28, 2010, on page MB1 of the New York edition.

Get the full newspaper experience, and more, delivered to your Mac or PC. Times Reader 2.0: Try it FREE for 2 full weeks.

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

Ads by Google

what's this?

NY&Company Cyber Monday

50% Off Online Sale + Free Ship on

All Orders. Offer Ends Monday!

NYandCompany.com

Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics

[Local Government](#)

[Taxation](#)

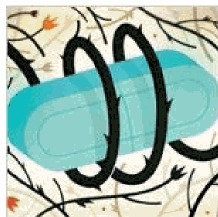
[New Jersey](#)

[Airports](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



WEEK IN REVIEW »



An AIDS Advance, Hiding in the Open

BUSINESS »



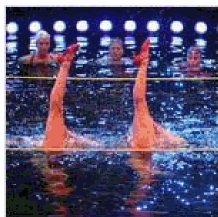
In Magazine World, a New Crop of Chiefs

OPINION »



Disunion: Off the Record, Behind the Scenes

SPORTS »



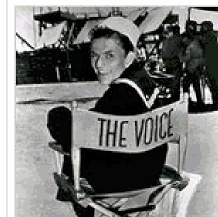
In Vegas, Synchronized Swimming as a Sh

OPINION »

The Stone: Paradoxical Truth

Paradoxes have been confounding minds since Aristotle, but we ignore them at our peril, writes Graham Priest.

ARTS »



When a Singer Crooned to

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#)

Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company | [Privacy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#)

MORE IN N.Y. / REGION (1 OF 16 ARTICLES)

'Spider-Man' Takes Off, With Some Bumps

[Read More »](#)