

**SUNDAY CONVERSATION:
Gina Genovese, head of
Courage to Connect N.J.**

November 14, 2010

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is another one of our "Sunday Conversations," a question and answer interview with a prominent Morris County person. This week, we feature Gina Genovese, the former mayor of Long Hill Township, who is the executive director of a non-profit group, Courage to Connect N.J., which is trying to reduce the cost of local government in New Jersey by merging municipalities. Genovese, 51, is a lifelong resident of New Jersey and a former professional tennis player.

Q: You have been a mayor and also a candidate for the state Senate in 2007, how did you move on from those activities to what you are doing now?

A: As a local elected official, after about two years, I realized the burden on 3,100 households in Long Hill. They had to pay for a police department a DPW, etc. and I just started to see that Long Hill Township should perhaps not exist by itself, that it would be a better town if we had more economies of scale to capture and if that happened, it would be a way to address the local property tax issue in New Jersey. That's not to say our police department and DPW were not great; we had 3,100 people paying for it. I started to ask a lot of questions, a lot of questions about municipal aid. I started to inquire about the size of towns and I started to look into it. I discovered that shared services is perhaps a step, but that really wasn't going to remedy the situation that New Jersey was facing. I said this is not the way to go; the way to go is to strengthen our local government.

Q: Why not shared services alone?

A: Because the economies of scale are not there. It's like if you merge two small towns, you get another small town. That's why with the Dover court system; it took five towns to make it work. The (proposed) Chester-Chester Township merger is a failed model. You'll just be creating another small town. That would be a town of 9,000 and there's not going to be enough savings. We have to drastically reduce our reliance on property taxes and we have to change the way we deliver (services).

Q: When was Courage to Connect created and how many people are involved in it?

A: It was founded in the fall of 2009. We have about six very active board members and we also have a full-time press company that we work with.

Q: Where does your money come from?

A: Right now, seed money came from me and we do have individuals who make donations. We also got a \$10,000 grant (from the Mariah Foundation) and we are actively seeking (additional) foundation and grant money.

Q: How would you describe your group's progress so far?

A: We're three years ahead of schedule.

Q: What are some of your measuring sticks?

A: People are already petitioning (for mergers) under 2007 legislation. The reason why Courage to Connect N.J. exists is two fold. First, to educate the public. People in New Jersey are smart. They need to understand this issue and they need to be educated. So what we do is we bring them in and we talk to them for about an hour and we say, "We're not going to tell you what to do, but go home and think about this." You're the ones who are paying for 566 redundant municipalities. So, you may have options here. Coming in January, we have what probably is going to be an 80-page handbook that's going to tell you the steps that you need to take. It's going to have model petitions, model applications. We're giving you all the tools and know-how on how to

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move this forward. People haven't had the tools. So, are we ahead of schedule? Yes. Before we even got our handbook ready, people in Merchantville petitioned (to merge with Cherry Hill).

Q: What's your long-term goal. We have 566 towns, how many should we have?

A: The goal is to present the model that works. And that would include five to 10 towns coming together. People can say, "Oh, that's really never going to happen." But then you look at New Jersey and you see that there are 151 communities already that are in regional school districts of five or more towns. So, they are already there. The model is already there. These are the communities in which it would be really helpful if they came together as the first step. If we do it and the model works, the rest of New Jersey will understand that this is what has to happen.

Q: Why are people reluctant at the idea of merging? Is it really just identity?

A: First of all, conditions economically couldn't be better (for a change in thinking). That 2 percent cap on property taxes is just going to further weaken their town. And I think they're tired of paying escalating property taxes. If you educate people, and if they really understand that their town is going to be perhaps better if they make it a little bit larger, they are going to catch on. And they're going to want to do this — consolidation driven by the people, not necessarily by the government, which is where it really has to come from.

Q: OK, but over the years, we have seen towns not wanting to merge, or even share services. Some would say it is necessary for the state government to get involved and force them? But you reject that idea.

A: Absolutely. The people of New Jersey are smart. They just need to be brought into the process.

Q: Yes, but we've seen some bizarre things. Mendham and Mendham Township a few years ago could not even merge police departments. And the towns are very similar. On this issue, you run into some small town thinking.

A: Yes, but that's why it has to be driven by the people. What I have noticed in New Jersey over the last few months is that there has been a logjam. A few mayors will take me aside and say, "I believe in

what you are doing. I understand it, but I can't talk about it. Because if I talked about it, my constituents will come after me."

Q: Why is that?

A: Because they aren't educated. They need to be brought along in the process. We're in a financial crisis like we have never seen. In the next two years, if we don't do something, New Jersey's in trouble.

Q: So, what are you doing every day to try to convince people to try something new?

A: We did about 12 presentations this fall. We're going to start up again in January. We are working very hard on our handbook now, because we want to have this launched in January. That's where most of our energies are going right now.

Q: Is your focus just municipalities, or school districts, too?

A: We started out with municipalities and now a lot of school board members are coming to us. The best places to start are where we have regional high school districts. We do not put towns together. We are just here as facilitators and educators. We guide people.

Q: Have you had conversations with the Christie administration?

A: We have been having conversations with the state.

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Q: Are they supportive?

A: Yeah, I feel that they are very supportive. We all have to work together. The key is the first time consolidation, or merging, or what I like to call connecting, happens, it has to be successful. There has to be enough savings that people say, "Yes, this is what we want to do."

Q: How large should these connected towns be?

A: Normally, it's between 30,000 and 50,000 when you start having economies of scale.

Q: I am sure you have heard people say that if a town is too big, you lose the hometown touch. The mayor, for instance, no longer lives around the corner.

A: Well, you have a ward system of government you can choose and you also can have a full-time mayor. So, you do not have a mayor who works in New York.

Q: A full-time mayor? Doesn't that conflict with the notion of saving money?

A: You have someone who is there and who is really accountable for what happens and who could interface with the state in a much more powerful way than a part-time mayor can.

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