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MORRIS PEOPLE: Former Long Hill NJ mayor wants towns to 'connect,' cut taxes

Gina Genovese is director of Courage to Connect NJ

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The tower of 566 placards in the corner of the living room at Gina Genovese's Millington home stands maybe 11 feet tall. It takes Wendy McCahill about 35 minutes during their presentations to display them one-by-one to an audience.

The placards represent the 566 municipalities in New Jersey.

If she had her way, Genovese would throw those placards into the air and only about 100 of them would return.

Those placards would represent the 100 new municipal governments in New Jersey, and, she said, the only real way to end the state's tax nightmare.

A business owner and former Democratic mayor of Long Hill, Genovese is the executive director of Courage to Connect NJ, a grassroots nonprofit organization that offers a vision for the state that drastically cuts the number of municipal governments, offers the real possibility to cut local taxes, promotes government efficiency in ways that no other model does, and still allows residents to say they live in Budd Lake, Lake Hiawatha, Millington or Stirling, Milton, White Meadow Lake or Long Valley.

"People need to have the room to understand that their town's identity will not change because their municipal administration changes," she said.

There are plenty of examples around New Jersey, she said. Short Hills and Millburn share an administration, but are seen as separate places; Woodbridge Township is a collection of 10 distinct local communities each with their own name; Long Hill is the township, but Stirling, Millington and Gillette are the better-known sections that residents identify as home.

For example, she said, the Chesters, the Mendhams and Washington Township, all of which are in the same regional high school district, could form a town of 38,000 or 39,000 residents, still maintain their local character but gain efficiencies with fewer administrators.

Genovese's vision goes beyond shared services. She was mayor when Long Hill and Bernards Township formed a joint police communications center, but feels that as innovative as that action was, the savings were insufficient.

"We were sharing 12 to 15 services," Genovese said. "Could we have 40 or 50? You're going to have nothing your town does by itself."

And that is that challenge she puts to mayors whose towns share more and more services: If you share everything, what are you exactly the mayor of?

That is why she is seeking five to 10 towns to "find the courage" to form one municipal administration

as a pilot program. She said her organization is seeking nongovernment financial support so that it can pay for any studies needed to support the creation of the new local government.

Genovese will hold a presentation in Morristown on Oct. 14. Information on the effort can be found at www.couragetconnectnj.org.

"I use the analogy of the frog in boiling water," Genovese said.

You know the one: If you drop a frog in to boiling water, it jumps out, but if you place a frog in water and slowly heat it to boiling, the frog sits.

Unless something changes, "the frog is going to die. We cannot save the frog," Genovese said.

How confusing is the state's municipal government system?

There are 11 separate forms of local government, she said, and at a recent course at Rutgers University the professor took 45 minutes to explain the sytem to mayors in the audience.

Genovese does not dispute that the state is in serious financial trouble, just how to change direction.

The current Trenton plan of budget cutting and cap setting does not get to the heart of the problem, she said. It addresses the effects, not the cause.

The result of the smaller state budget is that the percentage of the state's population who in the past received a homestead tax rebate, will not get one this year, meaning their taxes just went up, she said. The budget cuts, combined with the new 2 percent property tax cap agreed on by the governor and state Legislature, will result, unless there is an unlikely significant increase in state aid to towns and schools, in local layoffs, fewer and less efficient local services, and a degradation of the meaning of local government, she said.

"This cannot be solved in Trenton," Genovese said.

It can be solved by the state's residents, who in the state constitution and the 1978 Municipal Consolidation Act, have the power to eliminate local government charters and reform them, she said.

A key is to remove the emotions from the discussions, Genovese said, and to make residents understand "that this really does not have a whole lot to do with your little town, but is about the structure of the entire state, and it doesn't work."

New Jersey is caught with 18th-century governments in the 21st century, she said.

"We are all paying for it," she said. "One hundred percent of state income tax and one-half of 1 percent of state sales tax goes to support this structure." Two-thirds of the state budget supports local schools and towns.

It's an issue that has been studied for a half-century, she said.

"We have to bring the people along on these issues," she said. "We've been doing it for a year and can get people excited about this. They will make it happen."
