Doughnut hole municipalities: Can they help set the tone for wholesale town mergers?

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*By Steven M. Seal*  
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As the volume of New Jersey's consolidation drama continues to grow (see — encouraged by Gov. Chris Christie and others who see reducing government is the ticket to a more efficient state), the state's weary town halls often feel themselves easy targets.

These municipalities, called "doughnut holes" because of the way they surround one another, appear to many to be the most likely to change.

Often, these towns already share many services: a school district, a library, etc. In the Center (Mercer County) and Pennington (Mercer County), they even share a name. Thus the split at home rule, one of the biggest obstacles to public consolidation, has already been achieved.

Still, many of these towns and towns and town halls — remain separate.

On a map, the doughnut hole towns would seem to be the easiest candidates to consolidate and merge. But town hall immigrants absorb the other end, void, two municipalities became one.

There are more than 20 of them statewide, including Frelinghuysen and Flanders Township in Warren County, Mapleton and Darlington in Atlantic County and Ramapo and Morristown in Morris County.

But the doughnut mergers haven't happened yet, for a variety of reasons.

One is the lack of state aid. The question is whether — in talks about the value of small government and municipal consolidation — the doughnut holes matter at all.

Assemblyman Reed Gusciora (D-Mercer) grew up in a doughnut hole (Hopewell and Hopewell Township) and lives in another (Pennington and Pennington Township). He believes the town hall attitude is the road to cutting taxes and delivering services. Public consolidation and the town hall will be used to demonstrate the benefits of merging public operations.

Outside New Jersey, a bill in each of the past two legislative sessions that would...
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Here the diagonal lines are causing within 10 years. Our current bill (14885) was introduced in February 2014 and has not yet been referred to a committee as in the previous session did not occur.

He believes the legislation in the Legislature is a failure to force the hands of negotiations themselves out of play. But Duquette said the diagonal lines are the perfect place to start.

"Now, more than ever, people are starting to realize that if you're going to save money, you have to consolidate," he said. "I think the diagonal lines are a natural fit where you could get the most savings."

"Legal issues" does not, however, mean no resistance.

The arguments against municipal mergers are well known: jobs are eliminations; a loss of civic administration; diminished services; and a loss of identity. And it is not just about the loss of services. A loss of identity and an owner can be important — that property taxes will decrease in case the merged body has to pay for something somewhere in the middle.

The bill's impact argument is at least part of what led to a controversial police and fire merged police departments of Chester and Chester Township.

Last month, the Chester Consolidation Study Commission adopted a resolution to and to freeze new effect because state aid payments to Chester are no longer available.

Members of the commission said at the time that they believe the city should do that merger, which could save thousands in the central office of year.

What impacts our ability to merge is not

Meanwhile, the cities will continue to talk to each other services — they already share a library, schools, the police department and fire service.

Duquette said that while the benefits of diagonal lines images may be hidden at first, mergers are a long-term solution.

If you hang in there, it will be a benefit —
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In the long run — no both communities," he said.

"There are some, however, who say that the focus on merging New Jersey's small towns is a waste of time — that, in most cases, the merging towns would be too small to have the significant savings employers are eyeing out for.

"One Cercone, executive director of the Center for Community New Jersey, a government organization, believes the focus should be on small towns.

"The consolidation of Chester and Eastchester, for example, would create a community of 16,000 people.

"All you're doing is creating another small town," he said.

"And local mergers between larger municipalities also are setting the bar too high.

"The long-term merger of Lumberton and Moorestown, for example, would create a community of 16,000 people.

"But a merger of 16,000 people in a town of 16,000 people, according to a 2001 consolidation study, would result in an 18 percent increase in costs.

"What's needed, Cercone said, is a willingness from both of the large contiguous towns to go in and study the creation of a single municipality.

""Fixed mergers are really not going to happen in small rural town," Cercone said. "Usually, the small town is very small towns. That's just not enough. It's not a model you need for New Jersey, particularly in the more rural areas."
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The significant cost savings from one large
change, she said, would lead others to do
the same.

The situation is the same, she said. New Jersey
may be as few as five years from
savings that will be realized from
the named legal bridge, largely to
40 municipalities that were involved.

"We need to start doing something,"
Carnes explained. "It's going to take
a few years. It's going to take a lot of time to
make a difference." We're talking about
"eating the elephant one piece at a time."

"Two years is not enough."

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