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Courage to Connect New Jersey Lays Out Framework for Towns to Save Money By Connecting Municipalities Under One Administration

by John DeBellis at 06:05AM on Thursday, January 13 2011

BERKELEY HEIGHTS, NJ - On paper, the concept is fairly simple - New Jersey towns facing elimination of, or huge cuts, in state aid, should explore connecting multiple municipalities under one administration for the sake of cost savings.

The problem, according to Gina Genovese, the executive director of Courage to Connect New Jersey, who spoke with The Alternative Press after her presentation at the Berkeley Heights Library on Wednesday night, is that some towns are quicker to make decisions based on image than the substance.

"Loss of town identity is a huge fear," Genovese said. "We need to discuss town identity (in order to make progress)."

Courage to Connect has a tall order. It's a non-profit that exists to create awareness of the potential for the consolidation of municipalities that are often fraught with political fears and pride.

While readers of The Alternative Press and other news outlets have read quite a bit about shared services in municipalities recently, Genovese says that shared services is more of a band aid while amputation is really what is needed. It's no longer enough for two or three towns to share emergency dispatch systems, for example.

"I don't think it's a choice any longer, most towns have to do this," said Genovese, who is a former mayor of Long Hill Township. "The only way to bring about real, lasting, change is for five to 10 municipalities to join forces."

There are currently 566 towns in New Jersey that all have an opportunity to consider municipal consolidation with adjacent towns. Doing so, Genovese said, could bring the collective population of connected municipalities to 50,000, thereby making it easier to be considered for state aid.

Genovese, was joined by Courage to Connect's Board President Wendy McCahill, who held up in rotation, 566 placards bearing the name and population of every town in New Jersey.

After several placards had been rotated, Genovese asked: "Do we really need to have 566 separate governments in New Jersey all with the same administrations and services?"

Genovese gave the example of Woodbridge, whose municipal administration is comprised of 10 towns – names that Jerseyans know, such as Colonia, Iselin, Woodbridge, Fords, Reading, Avenel.

"What makes Woodbridge Township so unique is that it is the oldest town in New Jersey, and it did not fracture off like every other town in the state," Genovese said. "Today, it's 10 towns, but it is one community."

"They are so big they have their own IT person," Genovese said. "They are saving millions and million of dollars. They also have a fulltime grant writer and an economic development officer. This person is bringing in jobs. We need to have economic development in New Jersey."

To continue to bring their message to municipal officials and the public, McCahill and Genovese said they have just completed a booklet that instructs communities and town residents on how to get the change process started. They said it will be available on their Web site http://www.couragetoconnectnj.org/ by month's end.

In the meantime, statewide presentations are going over well.

"I liked the fact this is a grass roots effort and non-partisan," said Marlene Sincaglia, who is the president of the League of Women voters in Berkeley Heights, Summit and New Providence. "The idea of educating the public on a program that would be a win-win situation is exciting."

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