

Team Position: Keep County & Municipal Governments: Make Delivery of Services More Efficient & Cost Effective

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Overview

There are benefits and drawbacks to the current structure of County and Municipal government in Bergen County. However, given economic, environmental, demographic and political considerations, the optimal governmental structure going forward would be to preserve both forms of County and Municipal government in some capacity, and make delivery of government services more efficient and cost-effective.

What are some key facts?

Bergen County's tax levy for 2009 was 339,475,000 for a county population of 891,000.

- The estimated cost of county government per capita is \$382.
- The average property tax in Bergen County is approximately \$8,000.

What are the benefits of local/municipal government?

There has been a long tradition of local government in Bergen County, and as a result, most citizens expect some form of local representation. Each of the 70 municipalities in Bergen County, has its own public issues and unique political agenda..

Some of the benefits of preserving local government include:

- Municipal leaders have a greater understanding of local issues and the priorities expressed by their constituents.*
- Local leaders are more accessible and have a greater appreciation of the needs of their community.*
- Greater transparency in local government*
- More personal contact, interaction and responsiveness to residents*
- Constituents want and prefer home rule*
- Historical value and pride associated with towns and schools*
- Greater efficiencies in some services such as leaf collection, snow plowing, minor road repairs, maintenance of ball fields)*
- Greater volunteerism spirit within the community*

What are the benefits of county government?

Despite the historical popularity and success of municipal government in Bergen County, there is no doubt that county government also provides a valuable function. For example, the county can provide facilities and services that cannot be provided by the multiple municipal governments and cannot be provided cost effectively by state government.

Some of the areas where County government provides better services and economies of scale:

- *county colleges*
- *larger parks and recreational facilities*
- *county jails*
- *county courts*
- *hospitals*
- *county road (longer roads passing through multiple municipalities)*
- *health and human services (housing, health, senior services, mass transportation)*
- *training of emergency medical and firefighters*

Regional Emergency management and planning

The County coordinates shared services in many cases. Examples of which are cooperative salt purchase for municipalities, cooperative snow plowing agreements, handicap ramp construction is provided under a cooperative bid administered by the County. In addition, a county government can provide a wider scope in regional planning and strategy that can benefit all municipalities, for example in mass transit.

Issues with Consolidation of Municipal and County Government Services

A counter proposition to maintaining both County and municipal governments as they currently exist is to consolidate municipalities. Recent efforts to force consolidation has resulted in local officials "digging in their heels." It is our opinion that mandating consolidation/regionalization will meet with a great deal of public resistance for a number of reasons - expected loss of service quality and possibly an increase in cost (due to mismanagement and the loss of transparency).

As a result of consolidation being a very tricky political proposition, generating widespread public support is often complicated. History has shown that municipalities have voted to reject consolidation plans in the past (e.g. Hasbrouck Heights/Woodridge).

The elimination of county government would not take away the financial burden of the taxpayers. It would simply shift the responsibility and cost of these services to State and local governments. Furthermore, widespread changes in local laws would need to be

mandated consistently across all municipalities throughout the State to account for shifts in governmental responsibility.

That being said, interest in sharing services appears to be growing. Somerset County reported saving \$13 million in 2005. There are already several successful examples in Bergen County. The Bergen County mutual aid system, County training of emergency medical personnel and firefighters, County communication system for emergencies, shared service agreements that provide street sweepers, Jet Vac's and police cars, and the Bergen Municipal Bank. Another example of shared service that provides economics of scale is tax collection. The municipality collects taxes on behalf of the county and the local school board. This cost-effective measure could be successful throughout the State. Unfortunately, many times municipal governments sometimes take the blame for rising taxes when in fact only a small portion of the taxes collected remain with the municipalities.

There are many other opportunities for shared services and the benefits of regionalization. Some of the most promising areas to consider shared services include:

Consolidation of police services; consolidate county police, Sheriff's office (557 employees, \$59M budget), Department of Law and Public Safety (133 employees; \$19M budget) and Prosecutor's office (298 employees / \$28.4M budget)

Consolidate police and emergency dispatching through Bergen Communication Center

Consolidation of local municipal courts (70 into 6 regional courts, for example).

Creation of a modernized county based system of tax assessment

Consolidate fire districts similar to the way it was done in Cherry Hill, New Jersey yielding a 36% reduction in cost

Create and encourage the formation of energy consortiums and J.I.F. (Joint Insurance Funding)

Share or consolidate garbage and recycling services/contracts, road paving jobs, fuel purchase, electricity

Merge or share planning and zoning boards to reduce management, secretarial, engineer and lawyer fees, as well as code enforcement and construction officials.

Continue to promote regional Co-ops similar to Riverside Co-ops (which includes 13 municipalities) to purchase in bulk and share expenses.

Centralized risk management and health insurance.

Unfortunately, regionalization is not a one size fits all initiative, and as a result, there are some areas needed to proceed with caution. They include:

- Emergency service dispatching - this service may be best served on a regional basis vs. local or county-wide basis. This initiative brings in efficiencies and keeps some level of familiarity with the regional area served.
- Merging fire departments and ambulance corps – this initiative will be more difficult when dealing predominantly volunteer organizations.
- Consolidation and regionalization of small school districts (78 in total) or at least share administrative service. However, too large of a school district would result in too many layers of executive and possibility for corruption (Bergen Tech problem).

Structurally, shared services provides the best opportunity for correcting errors. Consolidation of municipalities would be irreversible, since there would no longer be a local unit representation.

Some of the obstacles to accomplishing shared services seems to be a lack of a unified code of regulations in the State law. There are currently 300 provisions for service sharing. Civil Service rules should be viewed as another obstacle. The question arises “How does one set of employees who are civil service merge into a local unit that is not civil service? What happens to their rights under civil service law? Even without civil service, there are multiple, conflicting personnel policies and pay schedules. Public Law 07/63 allows for a Management Committee comprised of officials and administrators from each municipality.

Shared Services would be implemented by the Mayor/Council, Board or Commission in the local administration, but there are provisions for citizen participation in the decisions. (e.g. formation of Citizen Commission P.L. 07/63). The county administers grants for needs assessments (e.g. the PARIS Grant for shared records management). On the state level, Local Finance Board (Division of Local Services in the Department of Community Affairs) decides the statutory basis under which shared services would be governed. The state would also be involved since different State Departments oversee specific activities.

The motivation to enter into shared service agreements may become even stronger as a result of Governor Christie’s 33 bills which include a proposed 2.5% cap on property taxes and reduced pay and benefits for public employees.

Citizens are interested in reducing their tax burden. Shared Services has not been explored thoroughly to prove it's potential of saving funds. Due to the administrative obstacles, the leaders in each community need to be persistent and patient.. Shared Services has the most promise for maintaining local control, community identity and quality of life while cutting costs.