

## **State Outlines Merger Guide for Princetons**

**Wednesday, April 29, 2009**

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**Special to the Trenton Times**

PRINCETON TOWNSHIP -- The state will fund feasibility studies on shared services and consolidation and has set up programs to make consolidation easier, a state official told officials and residents of the two Princetons last night.

Marc Pfeiffer, a former borough resident who is the deputy director of the Division of Local Government Services at the State Department of Community Affairs, outlined the process for looking at shared services or consolidation at a public meeting hosted by the township that drew a standing-room only crowd.

"Generally two or more local units working together can accomplish more than either working independently," Pfeiffer said. "Economies of scale result in reduced costs."

Pfeiffer explained that new state laws from 2007 provide for a new process for studying consolidation that offers more flexibility and new opportunities. The state's Local Finance Board can authorize a consolidation study commission at the request of a governing body, or if a petition is submitted signed by a minimum of 10 percent of the voters who voted in the last General Assembly election.

"A study commission makes a recommendation to the governing bodies," Pfeiffer said. "It is basically the opening act to get to municipal consolidation."

The state would provide funding for the study, including a consultant. The study must be completed within three years and look at the potential timing of consolidation and how the municipalities would handle duplicate positions. A name must be chosen for the potential merged municipality and the commission would look at the form of government that would be best (i.e., council, committee, strong mayor, ward system).

In municipalities where consolidation is approved by the voters, a state consolidation fund would address one-time cost obstacles to consolidation. State grants could also cover implementation costs for any new shared services.

Potentially property owners of one of the merged municipalities could see their property taxes go up as a result of a merger. But Pfeiffer said the state would provide property tax relief to such property owners in the form of a tax credit for the difference in the old and new tax, as long as the person owns the property.

Pfeiffer said state law protects seniority, tenure and pension rights for law enforcement personnel and abolishing a department does not eliminate that protection. The new law does permit terminal leave payments and early retirement incentives for employees who leave due to a shared service agreement.

Borough Councilman David Goldfarb asked if there was a mechanism for the borough to retain its parking revenue and revenue from hotel taxes if the two municipalities consolidate.

Borough Councilman Roger Martindell said one service the municipalities could easily share is the municipal court, where the staffs already crossover. Pfeiffer said courts are one of the most popular shared services.

Borough resident Mark Freda said a single police force would be more effective, more flexible, and provide better overall service.

Ron Nielson of the borough questioned how the consolidation process could be undone. Pfeiffer said only state legislation could create two new municipalities. "In other words, it doesn't leave us as much flexibility as the shared services approach," said Nielson.

Sam Smoyer, a former Princeton resident who now lives in Plainsboro, was has been involved in consolidation efforts dating back 45 years or more and has witnessed each one defeated.

"I hope you find it feasible to go forward with your study and find it would make good sense," he said to the applause of the audience.

Township Mayor Bernard Miller, who supports consolidation, told residents their input will be important in what the governing bodies do. He highlighted the police department, public works and staff of both municipalities as key cost saving areas that need to be addressed.

"Over the past several decades these two communities have managed to find a way to share about 14 committees, commissions and departments to provide better services at lower costs," he said. "Looking forward, if we are to provide better services at lower costs, we need to go where the costs are. Don't nibble around the edges."

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