

## **Towns Consider Merging Courts**

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BURLINGTON COUNTY - Two Burlington County municipalities are hoping to land state grant money to study the benefits of consolidating their court services.

Maple Shade and Moorestown have applied for a shared services grant from the state's Department of Community Affairs. If the funding is approved, Maple Shade manager George Haeuber said a contract will be awarded for the feasibility study.

Officials in both towns have emphasized that no plans for a merger have been set. But the two municipalities have been sharing court facilities for two years, since a fire shuttered Moorestown's municipal building in August 2007.

"This has just naturally kind of grown out of that," Haeuber said. "It runs pretty smoothly, and I think everyone decided we should at least do the due diligence and determine if it might be feasible to do more."

Moorestown Manager Chris Schultz agreed.

"We're using their facility now, why don't we at least look at it?" he said.

Moorestown council first discussed the merger idea last year, and the issue was revisited during this year's budget talks because of an especially tight funding crunch, officials said.

"If the money is there (for the study), let's take a look at it," Schultz said. "Especially knowing that down the road we'd have to explore this kind of thing anyway. Let's see if we can make this more permanent."

Officials in both towns said they are constantly looking for ways to share services and save money.

"In today's environment, we have to look at it," said Shultz.

Haeuber said Maple Shade already shares its assessment services with Eastampton, and is continually searching for other ways to consolidate.

"We've looked at any number of options, just about anything you can think of except for police," he said.

Haeuber said he hopes to complete the study in time for 2010 budget talks.

But both Haeuber and Schultz cautioned the merger idea needs to be thoroughly evaluated before anything is decided. The firm that conducts the study will look at court processes in both municipalities and decide whether a merger makes the most sense.

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