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The two Berlins should look at becoming one

It would make no sense for both towns to spend millions on new municipal complexes.

The mold problem in the aging Berlin Borough municipal building opens a door for the two Berlins to look at becoming one entity to save taxpayers money over the long-term.

The borough recently was forced to move all employees out of its historic municipal building because of severe mold problems. The borough police force, clerk's office, and other departments are now scattered in different buildings around town.

Meanwhile, neighboring Berlin Township is also without a municipal building. The township moved all of its functions out of its decaying municipal building a year and a half ago and is now working out of trailers.

Berlin Township Mayor Phyllis Jeffries-Maguzzu said the two municipalities have "talked briefly" about constructing a new municipal building together. That's an excellent and completely logical idea – and one that would save taxpayers in both municipalities a lot of money.

These municipalities already share so much beyond a name. Residents shop at the same stores, enjoy the same restaurants, attend the same churches, etc.

In fact, the two Berlins should go farther than just pitching in to build a single municipal building to serve both. They should explore rejoining into one municipality, as they existed from 1910 until 1927, when the borough broke away.

The time is right, in so many ways, for a reunification. Both the township (population 5,400) and the borough (population 7,900) stand to lose some of their annual state aid under Gov. Jon Corzine's proposed state budget. Trenton is looking to cut aid for municipalities with fewer than 10,000 residents to force local governments to merge and share services. Property taxes are out of control in this state, and a big reason for that is that residents pay to support far too much government. It's very expensive, tax-wise, for a few thousand residents to support all the services and facilities of a local government – including expensive police and public works departments.

Bringing the two Berlins together would put the population comfortably over the 10,000 mark and ensure no cut in state aid.

Coupled with the potential loss of state aid if they remain separate, both towns are likely looking at spending several million dollars to construct new municipal buildings to house the police station, courtroom, clerk's office, zoning office and other departments and offices.

There's just no logical reason for the people of both towns to potentially take on a major property tax increase to pay for two buildings when one building – and one government – could serve their needs at far less cost.

Certainly a merger would bring hurdles. At least some residents of each place probably have negative opinions of the other Berlin. Also, there are separate elementary districts in the township and borough. For high school, borough kids go Eastern Regional High School in Voorhees and township

kids go to Overbrook High School in Pine Hill.

But rather than allow the schools to be a deal-breaker in consolidation, the state Department of Education, state lawmakers and even the governor's office should get involved to work with the towns and the school district involved to help make consolidation happen.

All over South Jersey and the rest of the state, the time has come for tiny localities where residents face steep property taxes to realize that those high property taxes come from having too much government.

We don't need one council, one borough clerk, borough manager, police department, fire department, public works department, town manager, municipal court, borough solicitor, planning and zoning office, code enforcement chief, and so on, for an area that's only three or four square miles, or less, and has only a few thousand residents. It's a waste of tax dollars. These services can be provided over larger geographic areas and eliminate the costly duplication of services.

Up and down the White Horse and Black Horse pikes, along the Delaware River in Gloucester and Burlington counties, and elsewhere in our region, it's time for small towns to start reading the writing that's on the wall and heed the signals coming from Trenton: To fix this state's property tax problem, consolidation must happen.
