

Editorial: 2 efforts to consolidate have merit

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Consolidation proposals facing several area communities would be radical departures from the norm, but each should be given serious consideration because the end result could be what's best for everyone.

- A recent study found that if the five police departments in Whitestown consolidated, it would be the most complex action of its kind in state history, but could also create significant savings.
- Officials from Oneida County's three 911 call centers – Utica, New Hartford and the county — said last week that although it's not clear how much a consolidated system would save, it's worth looking into.

Communities involved now need to appoint panels — a blend of professionals and community residents — to gather public opinion and determine how to make this happen. In each instance, a major hurdle they'll need to clear is the discouraging attitude that it's always been this way. Such resistance to change can be costly to taxpayers and detrimental to the region's growth.

Consolidation efforts, on the other hand, can help create a broader sense of community that can be an effective marketing tool attractive to business and industry.

In the case of the Whitestown police, the Center for Governmental Research in Rochester has determined that combining the town department with village departments in New York Mills, Yorkville, Whitesboro and Oriskany could lower costs significantly.

Its report, "Consolidating Police Services in Whitestown, New York: Options for the Future" suggests three models for consolidating. The most basic would lower net operating costs by approximately 14 percent, or more than \$220,000.

The report doesn't offer an opinion on whether the communities should consolidate, but does conclude that they "appear to be good candidates for consolidation."

The proposed 911 consolidation could result in similar savings and efficiency, although more study is needed. As with the Whitestown proposal, it would involve realigning current procedures and staffing. In New Hartford, for instance, the center fields emergency calls to its 911 line, but also non-emergency calls that don't have to be addressed immediately. That would require staffing changes.

If Utica joined with the county, the resulting staffing changes could have public benefit beyond cost savings. It would free up about a dozen police officers who currently staff the call center and put them on the streets, Utica Public Safety Commissioner Daniel LaBella said.

Neither consolidation is a done deal. What's encouraging is that officials in both instances have agreed to explore the idea.

"If we can do it right and if we can save money and maintain or improve efficiency, then forge ahead," New Hartford Police Chief Raymond Philo said. "But that's always been the challenge."

It's a challenge communities cannot afford to pass up.