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SCHOOLS: Shared efficiency

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The City of Tonawanda and its local school district share the same boundary, but each entity does its own thing when it comes to most purchasing, maintenance and technology needs.

That could change, however, as the two entities are collaborating in an effort to become more efficient, saving taxpayers' money in the process.

"The city and the school district are unique because you have the same boundary," Scott Sittig, a senior research associate with the Rochester-based non-profit Center for Governmental Research, said during a public hearing Monday night in City Hall.

The meeting — which was attended by approximately 20 people, the overwhelming majority of whom were city and school officials — was held to discuss details of a project in which CGR has been hired to examine overlapping services between the city and school district, as well as taking a look at properties such as City Hall and Clinton H. Small Stadium.

"As the mayor alluded to, what affects one affects the other, so you have some incentive to look at land use," Sittig said.

Last year, Tonawanda and the Tonawanda City School District received funds through the Shared Municipal Services Incentive program, created in the 2005-06 state budget to provide grants to two or more local government entities with the purpose of streamlining common operations. This year, the state awarded 67 grants totaling \$13.7 million.

"The high cost of government has become an impediment to economic growth in many regions in New York state," Gov. David Paterson said in May, when the grants were announced. Paterson said the collaborative projects demonstrate that "significant cost savings are possible, if we think creatively and act diligently."

Tonawanda officials are now in the beginning stages of doing exactly that, based on information being collected by CGR, which has performed similar studies throughout the state. City leaders are working with the school district to identify potential savings opportunities by jointly providing public services in three key areas: purchasing, technology and property maintenance. As an example, CGR will compare the two entities' vendor lists and offer recommendations on purchasing agreements.

Part of the study also will look at additional savings that could result from better use or the possible sale of buildings and property currently owned by both entities, namely Clint Small Stadium, which is used for a variety of Tonawanda High School athletic events, and City Hall. Mayor Ron Pilozzi has said numerous times that he favors relocating the stadium to the high school campus.

By late September, CGR plans to present a report based on the data it has collected and analyzed. The group will then identify areas of overlap, and offer cost-saving measures the city and school system can use to merge services.

Whitney Vantine, who became Tonawanda's superintendent earlier this month, said he's looking forward to the project and seeing the results. "I've always been a big believer (that) you've got to reach out to those other municipalities," Vantine said. "You're drawing from the same resources, so it makes sense to have those parallel conversations."

CGR also will offer cost-benefit analyses of relocating City Hall and the football facility, but it won't tell city leaders which option to choose; that's up to them.

For example, CGR will determine how much City Hall could fetch on the market, compared to the cost of building a new City Hall elsewhere. Ditto for Clint Small Stadium. Tracy Dankanich, who has served on the district's budget advisory team, said moving the stadium is a good idea. "I think that's fantastic," she said.

Dankanich also agreed with some Tonawanda School Board members' suggestion to consolidate the district's four elementary schools into one campus, which would cut down on fuel costs by bussing students to one location rather than four. "With the way gas prices are, it makes sense to try and consolidate our buildings," said School Board President Joyce Hogenkamp. In turn, that would put other properties on the market for development, Councilman Jim Kossow said.

Given the trend of population decline in Western New York, Tonawanda's shared services study is happening at an important time, said Joseph Stefko, CGR's public finance director and project manager for this particular study, adding that the city's population is both declining and aging at a faster rate than the rest of Erie County.

"If we don't start doing this, there isn't going to be a Tonawanda," Pilozzi said of the collaborative effort. "I think we all want Tonawanda to be here for our kids and our kids' kids."

Based on Monday's conversations, Dankanich said she thinks progress will be made. "It definitely gives me hope. It's nice to see that we're moving forward."

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