



The Princetons were model candidates

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George Amick/For The Times

By

Princeton voters did an extraordinary thing last Tuesday — probably more extraordinary than most of them realize.

The folks in the borough and the township approved a merger of their municipalities, the first significant consolidation in the state in 60 years. Not since 1951, when Vineland City and Landis Township joined to form Vineland Township, has a pair of towns in home-rule-obsessed New Jersey willingly surrendered their separate autonomies for the sake of greater efficiency and economy.

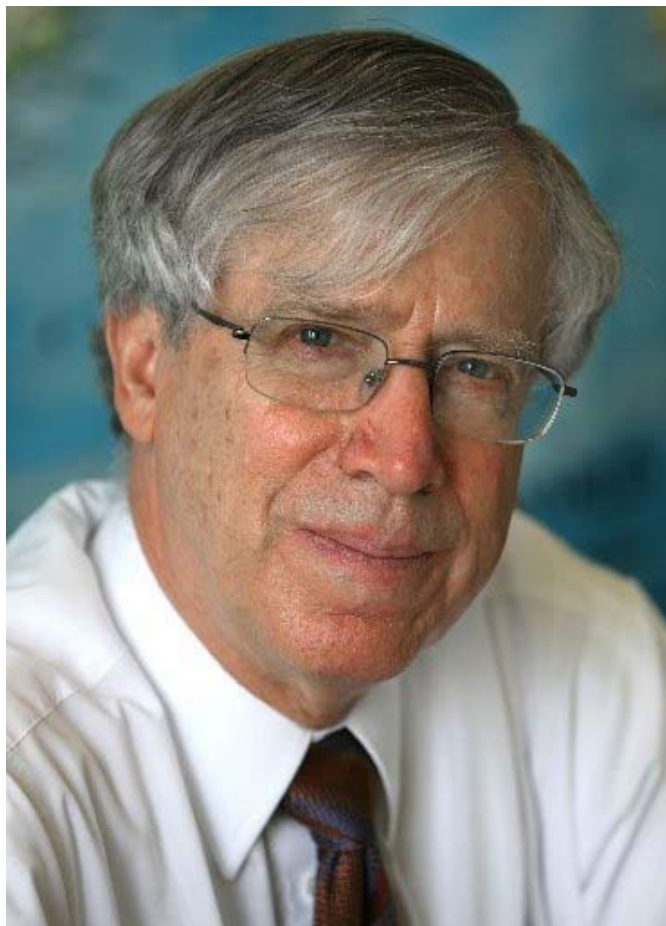
When the Princeton governments combine Jan. 1, 2013, New Jersey will have one fewer municipality. “Only” 565 will remain.

The referendum in the Princetons was the fourth over the decades in which a consolidation proposal was on the ballot, and the first to win the necessary majorities in both towns. How did it succeed? And could it inspire similar municipal marriages around the state?

No one is better positioned to assess these matters than Marvin Reed, who was a pro-merger mayor of Princeton Borough in 1996, when the issue last went before the voters and won in the township but failed in the borough. He’s also a member of the Local Unit Alignment, Reorganization and Consolidation Commission (LUARCC), a state agency that was created to study and promote greater intermunicipal cooperation, from shared services to outright mergers. He and his wife, Ingrid Reed, the retired director of the Eagleton Institute’s New Jersey Project, tramped the borough’s streets in the days before Nov. 8, ringing doorbells and urging residents to vote yes.

Reed noted that the referendum was held under a faster, more flexible procedure authorized by the Legislature a couple of sessions ago. “There was much greater involvement than before by the two governing bodies,” he said. “We had an excellent study commission that involved four elected officials — the two mayors, a borough council member and a township committee member — as well as motivated citizen representatives who were selected to represent a range of opinion.

“The study, commissioned from the Center for Governmental Research of Rochester, N.Y., was outstanding, and much more thorough than had been done before.”



Times File

STRONG OPPOSITION

Still, the opposition was strong and vocal. The Princeton Township police union sent letters to residents criticizing the proposal, under which the 60 officers in the combined police departments would be reduced to 54 in 2014 and to 51 in 2015. Some borough residents warned that the borough would lose its identity in a larger Princeton, that its residents would be outvoted in the new council by residents of the larger township, and that the risks weren't worth the \$3.2 million in projected annual savings.

"These are very emotional issues, and they come up no matter where in New Jersey this kind of thing is attempted," Reed said. "You have to figure out a way to overcome it. To some extent, it was overcome by the behavior of the study commission. All but one of the members supported the proposal, as did all the elected officials except that one person. They were willing to give up their own seats in the existing governments to come up with a more economical and efficient system.

"The commissioners bonded, and they waged a vigorous campaign. They didn't just file the report in the town library and assume that the citizens would all come and read it. One of the best things they did was provide statements from residents who said they had previously voted against consolidation and had started out with the same bias this time, but had been convinced by the advocates and turned off by the opponents."

Some optimists believe the Princeton vote will be a catalyst, including Gina Genovese, director of the pro-consolidation Courage to Connect New Jersey, and author of a recent op-ed column for The Times. Others, such as Reed, don't anticipate a "stampede" to merge. The Princetons were in many ways model candidates, with similar populations, education and income levels, tax rates and world view; they already share numerous services and jointly host a world-famous university — and it took them four tries to succeed. And, as Reed suggests, other towns will find it difficult to match the dedication of the local consolidation commission and the quality of the report produced by its consultant.

HELP FROM CHRISTIE

Gov. Chris Christie has spoken in favor of municipal consolidation and shared services, but it's unclear how much practical help he's willing to provide. On one hand, Christie's administration did pay half the cost of Princeton's study and has agreed to pick up 20 percent of the estimated \$1.3 million transitional costs of the Princeton merger and allow the payment to be stretched out over five years. On the other hand, he cut from his budget money that would have encouraged mergers by protecting residents of participating municipalities from any resulting property-tax increases.

There's no need for the latter protection in Princeton, where all property owners are expected to save on taxes (\$591 annually in the borough, \$416 in the township).

However, the loss of this state funding brought a grinding halt to a promising merger movement in Chester borough and township, where a referendum originally planned for last November has been postponed indefinitely.

And Christie has all but ignored LUARCC, the only state agency that exists to provide data, advice, assistance and encouragement to municipalities that are exploring consolidation and shared-service agreements. He has left it without funds, with vacancies and with minimal staff assistance. "It's possible that LUARCC will be refinanced" as a result of the Princeton outcome, Reed said hopefully. "But that's pure speculation on my part."

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