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Princeton Says 'Yes' to Consolidation

The unofficial numbers from Princeton Township and Princeton Borough, which do not include absentee ballots, show consolidation has passed.

By [Greta Cuyler](#) and [Dan Pazos](#) [Email the authors](#) 2:20am

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Decades after the debate began and following multiple votes and impassioned pleas on both sides, Princeton residents voted to consolidate Princeton Borough and Princeton Township into one entity.

"Thank God," said Borough Councilor Roger Martindell on Tuesday night after the unofficial results were reported to a packed post-election party at Conte's Pizza.

"We're only about 15 years too late, but better late than never," he said.

Tuesday's vote was a hard-fought victory for those who supported the Princeton Consolidation and Shared Services Study Commission, which voted in May to recommend consolidation by a vote of 9-1.

In Princeton Borough, a donut hole municipality that is surrounded by Princeton Township, the vote was 1,238 in favor of consolidation and 828 against it. Voter turnout was 47 percent.

Princeton Township residents supported consolidation with 3,542 votes, and 604 voters were against it. Voter turnout was 41 percent.

Patrick Simon, a commission member who explained the financial ramifications of a merger during countless consolidation meetings, had one word to describe how he felt following Tuesday's news: "Exhausted."

The Battle for Princeton

Two citizen groups emerged in recent months to lobby for votes, especially among undecided voters. UnitePrinceton! called consolidation a common-sense, long-term solution to fiscal uncertainty. Members of Preserve Our Historic Borough attacked the commission's estimated annual savings of nearly \$3.2 million, and said Township residents could potentially outvote Borough residents on each issue 2:1 because of its size.

For consolidation to pass, both the Borough and the Township had to vote in favor the merger.

Princeton Township voters have consistently supported consolidation so Tuesday's battleground was focused within the Borough.

Members of both the pro- and anti- consolidation groups walked the Borough streets and knocked on doors, and explained to voters what a merger might mean for Princeton's future.

In the end, it may have come down to numbers.

UnitePrinceton! gathered the names of more than 500 residents who supported consolidation and Borough Council Chairman Kevin Wilkes said Tuesday there was no shortage of volunteers willing to go door-to-door.

Members of Preserve Our Historic Borough said recently they had a “few dozen” supporters.

What Changed?

Princeton voters blocked consolidation in the past, but the difference today is that the Borough and Township share similar demographics and both struggle to maintain the current services without raising taxes, said Marvin Reed, who was Borough mayor during the 1996 consolidation vote.

Wolanin, co-chair of UnitePrinceton!, said now is the time to consolidate because the township and borough have both a nearly equal tax rate and debt per resident.

“Consolidation is beneficial to both the borough and the township,” Wolanin said. “We’re not in crisis yet, but in the future if the borough was in fiscal crisis, why would the township want to consolidate?”

Borough resident Brad Middlekauff said Tuesday said he was on the fence about consolidation, but was ultimately swayed in favor of it after reading letters printed in local newspapers.

“There is enough commonality of interest between the two towns,” Middlekauff said.

Joe Stefko, a consultant and director of finance for the Center for Governmental Research who worked with the consolidation commission, said Tuesday he was not surprised by the outcome.

“I think that this commission did an incredible job bringing the community along during the conversation, and more importantly listening to the community during the process.”

The pro-consolidation movement gained a strong advocate last month when Gov. Chris Christie publically endorsed consolidation in Princeton. Christie announced he would introduce legislation to cover 20 percent of a municipality’s one-time consolidation expense, and work to have all related costs amortize over a five-year period.

“Consolidation provides us with a great opportunity to control costs, make government more effective and efficient and this is an important step toward enhancing the quality of life for borough residents, soon to be Princeton residents,” said Ryan Lilienthal, a member of the consolidation commission.

What Happens Now?

Now that the vote is in, the hard work begins.

Consolidation proponents say they hope to have a transition team in place by the end of the year, and 2012 would be the year when officials and residents outline how they plan to implement consolidation beginning in January 2013.

The consolidation commission has outlined a road map for where to begin efforts, and members have said they hope a transition team would look at the work that’s been prepared as a guide throughout the process.

“This kind of change is talked about in a lot of places, but changing municipal struggles is extremely difficult and requires a leap of faith in elected officials and in voters,” Stefko said.

Kate Warren, a member of Preserve Our Historic Borough, was cautiously optimistic about consolidation’s defeat on Tuesday evening before the polls closed. But she already knew what she would mourn if consolidation should pass.

“The next generation will never have a sense of the borough,” she said.

Though there have been many debates and arguments on each side of the consolidation issue, now is the time for unity, said Dan Preston, co-chair of UnitePrinceton!

“It looks like we are coming together as a consolidated community,” Preston said. “We are going to work together and make sure that none of the concerns (raised) come to pass.”

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