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Sharing: Consolidation efforts grow

Posted on August 8, 2011 at 5:59 am by Jimmy Vielkind, Capitol bureau in Small government, big cost

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(This post is part of a Times Union project looking at local government structure and cost. Click on the "Small government, big cost" tag on the right rail of the Capitol Confidential site to see charts, graphics and related articles.)

By KENNETH C. CROWE II
Staff writer

COHOES — Local identity, organizational culture and the failure to find substantial savings thwart the merger of local governments.

Cohoes and Watervliet are nearing the end of a state-funded \$45,000 study on whether to merge their fire departments.

The "Cooperation and Consolidation Study" estimated the merger could save the two cities up to \$305,000 and generate \$410,000 if Cohoes went into the ambulance business.

When \$715,00 is split between the two Hudson River cities, it doesn't go that far.

Cohoes Mayor John T. McDonald III said there isn't a lot of interest in a merger and the financial benefits are not large.

"The hard part is finding significant savings," McDonald said.

"We're not going to merge," Watervliet Mayor Michael Manning said.

The cities will continue their mutual-aid response for fires and see how they can save money through additional cooperation.

Cohoes and Watervliet have discovered the hidden truth that cost savings typically aren't tremendous when governments seek to merge or dissolve.

The New N.Y. Government Reorganization and Citizen Empowerment Act pushed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo when he was attorney general has not led to a flurry of consolidations of the roughly 10,500 local government entities in the state.

Without any financial incentives to conduct studies, Watervliet and Green Island have cooperated to save money and provide services. The city and the village aerial ladder truck they jointly purchased is housed at the Watervliet Fire Department and emblazoned with both communities' names. They run a joint bus service.

Manning said the two municipalities are nearing agreement on the city fire department providing ambulance coverage for Green Island. Insurance companies would be billed to pay for the service.

From purchasing to paving roads, she said, governments have long sought ways to battle costs. Rensselaer County Executive Kathleen Jimino said governments at all levels in the county were working to provide efficient services at lower costs to taxpayers. An investigation of what local governments do backs that up, according to Gardner.

"What we're discovering is many local governments do a pretty good job of sharing services with other local jurisdictions," said Kent Gardner, president of the Center for Governmental Research in Rochester. "A lot of times cost sharing is already happening."

The Albany County Sheriff's Office has completed a state-funded study of the county communications center in Voorheesville dispatching police, fire and ambulance services for Cohoes, Green Island and Watervliet. That study was funded by the state Local Government Efficiency Program, which also provided the grant to look into Cohoes-Watervliet fire departments' merging.

"It will be a huge savings. This is what people want to see," said Craig Apple, a former undersheriff now heading the sheriff's office, about the estimated \$750,000 the communities will save.

The two cities and the village would compensate the county for some dispatching costs over five years until the county assumes the total cost. The proposed contract is before the county attorney's office for review, Apple said. If the parties agree, the county would take over the dispatching next year.

Gardner said the costs of public safety with coverage around the clock can be daunting.

A 2009-10 report from the state Department of State's Local Government Efficiency Program, which paid for the dispatching and fire-department merger studies, estimated that taxpayers would save \$67 million over 10 years as a result



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of studies it had underwritten.

The program also has provided 38 grants to villages to study dissolution into their towns. Locally, that includes Corinth, which got \$49,500; Lake George, \$44,999; Schuylerville, \$49,789; and Victory, \$50,000.

Victory is still conducting its study. The other villages have not dissolved. Corinth's report recommended against consolidation with the town. The Lake George Village Board rejected merger. And Schuylerville voters rejected dissolving their village in the town of Saratoga.

"Towns and village mutually evolve not to duplicate the services that they provide," Gardner said.

Local identity also plays a role in preserving governments. People tend to identify with their village, hamlet or their school district instead of the larger expanse covered by the town where they reside. School districts particularly illustrate this, Gardner said, noting the districts "have a social character."

The Ichabod Crane and Schodack central districts are studying what their schools can do together.

In the 1980s, voters approved the Mohonasen Central School District annexation of the smaller Draper Central School District. During the same period, the Scotia-Glenville and Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake districts rejected a merger. More recently, North Colonie absorbed the tiny Maplewood Common School for cost savings.

The studies of consolidation and sharing of services can provide insights into streamlining government operations.

Manning and McDonald said they would discuss the fire study with an eye on the future.

"There's a sense that there are offshoots to pursue," Manning said.

"We can use it as a starting point of where we ought to be," McDonald said. "It pushes through the parochial notions we're all guilty of."

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