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Efforts by Princeton, NJ, show challenges in municipal mergers _ even when they make sense

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PRINCETON, N.J. — Fewer than 30,000 people call Princeton home, but two of them are mayors. There are also two police chiefs, two treasurers, two administrators and two public works superintendents in this community best known for its Ivy League university.

That's because one of each belongs to the Borough of Princeton, while the other belongs to Princeton Township, which wraps around the borough like a doughnut.

In November, voters from both municipalities will decide whether they should merge. It will be at least the fourth attempt in almost 60 years to create a unified Princeton and one of dozens of attempts over the years at consolidation in New Jersey.

Consolidation is an old idea that has been given new urgency in the aftermath of the recession, which has left some U.S. towns on the brink of bankruptcy and studying the issue. But difficult questions about economic benefits and community identity often get in the way.

In few places is the issue as pronounced as in New Jersey, a small but populous state with 566 municipalities, nearly 600 school districts and some of the highest property taxes in the country. By comparison, California would stretch from Maine to North Carolina if it were along the eastern seaboard, and it has 482 cities and 58 counties.

In New Jersey, staunch allegiance to home rule — the idea that towns should run their own affairs — led to the slow accumulation of local entities and eventually an outcry for consolidation in the name of efficiency and streamlined government.

Peter Thompson, a resident of Princeton Borough, said merger detractors called him a Nazi during an attempt 15 years ago. He said he suspects powerful borough landlords don't want to give up the favor they had built with council members.

He also can't see the distinction between the two municipalities that the opposition insists is there.

"I would challenge you to go down the street and tell me, this is the borough, this is the township," Thompson said.

Fusing the Princetons would save millions per year, a state study found. But the three prior failures and emotionally charged opposition demonstrate just how hard it is to get residents to sign off — even in a homogenous community like Princeton, where census data show dual municipalities with strikingly similar age, race and income profiles. In the most recent merger attempt, in 1996, the measure passed in the township but failed in the borough.

The borough, the “hole” in the doughnut, houses the downtown area and most of Princeton University. The township is much larger, but the borough is much denser. The line between the two entities crisscrosses neighborhoods and streets.

Long-term resident Cathy Blanchard said she sees police patrols drive up her street, then make an abrupt U-turn when they hit the invisible border.

“This all has to do with people’s perception and misperception about these ‘other people’ in the town over, even though they might not be very different at all,” said Norman Glickman, a Princeton Township resident who teaches public policy at Rutgers University.

Residents of both municipalities speak of losing their town’s identity or having their voice diluted when government encompasses more people. Some also said the other municipality’s residents have different philosophies or values — but they’re hard-pressed to identify the nature of those differences.

“It’s a matter of sense of place,” said Kate Warren of Preserve Our Historic Borough, who is leading the opposition to a merger. “It’s hard to articulate, because it’s a feeling.”

Linda Kelly, a 50-year-old teacher, moved in July to the borough from Cranbury, N.J., with her husband. They learned almost instantly that merging was a source of community tension. Kelly said she wasn’t yet sure how she would vote but didn’t buy the claims that savings would be as high as predicted.

“I don’t know what the effect would be,” Kelly said. “But I think the loss of the identity of the borough as a historical place would be a loss.”

Borough residents could be drowned out, Warren said, in a council that includes township voters. But Township Mayor Chad Goerner said that’s a concern only as long as township and borough residents are thought of as somehow different.

“The people are the same. The houses look the same. We’re not different,” Goerner said.

Goerner was part of a 10-member commission that studied consolidation for the past two years and found that a merger would save \$3.1 million per year after full implementation. The commission voted 9-1 in May in favor of consolidating, sending it to the November ballot.

But it’s not all about taxes, at least for voters. Suzanne Leland of University of North Carolina-Charlotte has studied merger attempts across the United States and found that a common theme among those that succeed: voters buy the argument that cooperation spurs economic growth, but they’re wary of claims that costs will go down.

“We call the first ‘strong campaigns’ and the second ‘weak campaigns,’” Leland said.

Dagney Faulk, an economist at Ball State University in Muncie and author of a book about local consolidation, said she has seen more localities ponder mergers to cut costs.

But it’s hard to identify examples of where mergers have worked the way supporters say it will. Consolidation advocates hold up as a model Woodbridge Township, N.J., a 25-square-mile area comprising 10 distinct

communities but sharing one mayor and one set of services. But Woodbridge started out with a consolidated government and never went through the merger process.

In most places, as in Princeton, votes have been taken and failed, study commissions have come and gone, and concrete action has been absent. A nationwide study in 2004 found that merger attempts succeed less than 15 percent of the time.

Attempts at consolidation in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County, home to Pittsburgh, date to the 1920s. In New Mexico, Kansas and Iowa, cities and counties have tried and failed to merge.

Mike Boudreau, a Detroit-based consultant who has worked on about a dozen Midwest consolidation projects, pointed to a string of economic factors that have converged in recent years to create a perfect storm for local governments: dwindling tax revenues, the crash of the housing market, the ballooning cost of providing worker benefits, onerous union contracts and restricted access to capital stemming from recent credit downgrades.

"Almost every municipality is struggling with cash, but nobody wants to admit it," Boudreau said. "Nobody wants to be the first to consolidate."

Next year, voters in Indiana will decide whether to merge the city of Muncie with Delaware County.

Once an industrial hub, Muncie has in recent years weathered the closure of a number of marquee factories, including a General Motors plant in 2006.

City Council President Robert Marshall voted to put a merger with the county on the ballot but worries it could harm economic development if it means a smaller government providing fewer services.

"We're in a depressed area," Marshall said. "You've got to provide the services and make our community attractive enough to bring industry here."

In New Jersey, consolidation gets mixed reviews. A 2009 Rutgers University study found no universal agreement on consolidation in general, but a poll the next year showed 54 percent of New Jerseyans favored it.

In 2007, state lawmakers created a commission to help the state determine which towns were ripe to merge or share services. The idea was to offer state funding to pay for transitional costs and lessen the burden on taxpayers if their taxes go up in the initial years, but the agency has sat largely dormant.

Gov. Chris Christie has tried to balance efforts to encourage consolidation with the rights of communities to determine their own futures, said his spokesman Kevin Roberts. In April, he signed legislation making it easier for towns to form commissions that must approve putting merger plans on the ballot.

The first fruits of that legislation came in August, when a state finance board approved a commission to study merging Merchantville and Cherry Hill, across the Delaware River from Philadelphia.

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