

Opinion: Is consolidation of New Jersey's towns inevitable?

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By Opinion

Change can be hard to accept at times, and so, too, can reality. So it's no surprise that the results of a recent poll show that more residents in New Jersey oppose merging their town with another than support it.

That's a change from four years ago, when a Rutgers-Eagleton poll found that more than half of the state's residents favored mergers. Analysts say the change in heart can be attributed to Gov. Christie's 2 percent cap on property tax increases.

But while Christie's cap has worked for limiting tax increases, for now, we don't know how long that will last. Christie has been pushing for municipal mergers for a few years now, and he may turn up the heat on towns soon.

You see, the state is in financial trouble. Once again, revenues fell very short of projections, this time by \$800 million. Christie deflected blame, saying many states overestimated tax revenues, partly because wealthy people began holding onto their money once federal temporary tax cuts expired.

That may be true, but it doesn't change the reality: New Jersey is in the red, big time, and it may require some serious budget cuts to get out. Throw in the fact that we're less than two months from the end of the fiscal year, and we could have a crisis on our hands.

That brings us back to the issue of consolidation. The state isn't getting any better when it comes to taxes. So while municipal tax increases have stabilized over the last few years due to the cap, the state as a whole collects the most in property taxes on average – a whopping \$8,000 per home.

Taxes may have stabilized, but they aren't likely to go down any time soon – unless something is done on the local level.

And that "something" could be consolidation.

Residents who are fearful of such a move because of the lack of control, lack of small-town identity, potential compromise of services, safety and education – among other issues – can look no further than Princeton as an example. The municipality just ended its first full year of consolidation between the former Princeton Borough and Princeton Township, and by all accounts, it was a success.

The consolidated municipality saw a more than 4 percent reduction in the budget because of the merger, while not compromising on safety, security, education and other services.

So why not follow Princeton's lead? Why not find a willing partner to merge with, share services with and save some money? It's an idea that might become a requirement, instead of an option, sometime soon.