



Can New Jersey Afford Its Small Towns?

By Stephen M. Sweeney, Senate Majority Leader (District 3)
Gloucester County Freeholder Director



Mayors from the first 10 towns to join the Gloucester County Regional EMS program join Freeholder Director Sweeney, Surrogate Helene M. Reed and Freeholder Joe Brigandi to officially sign their inter-local service agreements.

New Jersey has more municipalities per square mile than any other in the country. We have all heard the statistics before; 21 counties, 566 municipalities, 616 school districts and 186 fire districts. Too many? When it comes to government affordability, the answer is simply yes, in this day and age, too many layers of government for taxpayers to afford.

Despite the voluminous bureaucracies in our state, there are governments who have regionalized programs and share services extremely well, saving municipalities and ultimately taxpayers millions of dollars each year. So why don't more governments share and regionalize services? One reason is that some state legislation needs to be amended to make it easier for governments to share and regionalize, but the bigger reason is that too many elected officials are holding on to their individual "boutique-style" governments and administrations when they need to be thinking efficient "department-store" style.

Regionalization and sharing services is not a new concept. Most counties in the state have been providing 911 dispatching services to municipal governments for years now. Gloucester County has been providing dispatching services for fire departments and EMS since the 1980's and in 2000 began dispatching police for many municipalities. Today the county provides dispatching for 23 of the 24 municipalities and numerous other law enforcement agencies, and by April 1st all 24 towns will participate in the county's dispatching program. This program collectively saved municipalities \$6 million from their municipal budgets.

If one level of government, such as a county, can provide a regionalized or shared service more efficiently and cost effectively than more than 20 small governments on their own, and the service performance meet and exceed all standards, how can it be that there are still towns out there not taking advantage of the service?

In Gloucester County every single program that can be shared with another government or regionalized is studied. The county is willing to lead the way to provide the best service to residents, even if it means taking on more responsibility and funding, because we know that the economy of scale is going to prove beneficial to the taxpayer in the end.

Take, for example, a new initiative that Gloucester County was the first in New Jersey to launch last year. After much research, discussion and planning, in September of 2007, Gloucester County initiated a regionalized county-wide EMS program. Every municipality within the county was offered the opportunity to join the first phase of the county EMS program, and 10 of the 24 towns joined.

Not only has Countywide EMS saved lives since it began a little over six months ago, it has saved the 10 participating municipalities \$2.6 million in avoided costs. The success of this program is amazing, ambulances reach 911 callers much more quickly than they had when each small squad had responded on their own, and County EMS is significantly beating the "Gold Standard of Excellence"* response time of 8 minutes 59 seconds or less, 90 percent of the time. Gloucester County has extended another invitation to the

remaining towns to come into the regionalized program. To date, only one additional town has accepted.

Significant savings have been achieved by Gloucester County by combing the administrations of two county school districts. Since 2001 Gloucester County Special Services School District (GCSSSD) and Gloucester County Institute of Technology (GCIT) have been sharing an administration, equipment, facilities and other staff. This year they will also share a school board. The combined administrations of these school districts operate the county's full-time technical school, an alternative school, the Bankbridge Special Services Schools for special needs and multiply-disabled students grades K-12, and our new Bankbridge Development Center, a school designed specially for children with Autism.

The 2006/2007 school year marked the fourth consecutive year that the GCSSSD was ranked by the New Jersey Department of Education as published in their Comparative Spending Guide as having the lowest total administrative cost per pupil. Additionally, the Vocational-Technical School District (GCIT) had again improved and brought its ranking to third of the 21 state-wide county programs for lowest cost per pupil, down from number six in 2005/06.

Combining school administrations and sharing services saves taxpayers' money and delivers high quality education to our children. In Gloucester County a shared administration of our GCIT and GCSSSD works and saves

over \$1.3 million annually to the taxpayers, and the Department of Education's ranking substantiates the validity of the program. The sharing of these services has worked so well, that Gloucester County can continue to expand and enhance student programs, while still seeing a significant savings, a feat almost unheard of in the world of education.

Environmentally, savings can be achieved by regionalizing services. In 2004 NJDEP requirements for all municipalities to obtain permits for non-point source stormwater discharges, to adopt new stormwater standards for existing and new development, and to comply with a wide range of permit conditions. After these requirements were issued, Gloucester County created a regionalized Stormwater Management Program where the county and its 24 municipalities worked together to eliminate the duplication of 24 separate stormwater plans, equipment, materials and buildings. It has been estimated that it could have cost each municipality up to \$1 million to meet the NJDEP's mandated goals for reducing stormwater runoff on its own. Under the county plan it didn't cost municipalities a dime, and ultimately Gloucester County earned a \$1.1 million grant from the NJDEP's Division of Water for its leadership in implementing the regionalized program.

Virtually every aspect of government can be achieved as well, if not better, by a cooperative understanding between governments. Gloucester County is a leader in regionalizing

programs and sharing services, directly saving taxpayers money, and we are far from finished. Currently, the county is exploring implementing a county-wide Tax Assessors office, which would eliminate the need for costly revaluations to be done town by town and eliminate each individual tax assessor. The goal is to save money and create a fair assessment system where every town would be at 100 percent of true assessed value 100 percent of the time.

The bottom line is that sharing services and regionalization is about saving the taxpayer money while providing them with a quality service. In all the years I have served as a Freeholder I have never had a taxpayer stop me and say they were upset when they saw a county truck plow a municipal road or vice versa – taxpayers don't care who it is getting the job done, they want the job done and they want it done for a reasonable amount of money. The time has come for all of us to put aside our political differences and the imaginary geographic boundaries that separate us and do what is right for the taxpayers, which is sharing and regionalizing services whenever possible. ▲

Stephen M. Sweeney (D-3) is the Senate Majority Leader and Freeholder Director of Gloucester County. As the Gloucester County Freeholder Director Steve is a proponent of shared services and regionalization and has combined county school districts in order to save taxpayers over \$1million annually.

*The "Gold Standard of Excellence" is a standard of the Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Service and requires of a response time of 8 minutes 59 seconds or less, 90% of the time.

PLEASE NOTE 2008 MUNICIPAL DIRECTORY UPDATES

Blairstown Township

New Municipal Clerk: Phyllis E. Pizzaia

Burlington Township

New Municipal Clerk Email: ajcarnivale@rcn.com

Demarest Borough

New Municipal Engineer: Gary Vander Veer

Downe Township

New Municipal Clerk: Diane C. Patterson (Acting)

Hillside Township

New Municipal Attorney: Christine Burgess (Acting)
1409 Liberty Avenue, Hillside NJ 07205

Middletown Township

New Municipal Administrator: Frederick Jahn (Interim)

Montague Township

New Municipal Attorney: Bruce Padula

National Park Borough

Municipal Clerk/Administrator: Victoria Holmstrom