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## Home rule must apply when consolidation on table

By WILLIAM G. DRESSEL JR.

Assemblyman Reed Gusciora, D-Mercer, is sponsoring two bills in the state Legislature that would circumvent the work of a commission established by the Legislature just two years ago and supersede the will of the only people directly affected by the bills.

The first (A-3490) specifically directs the consolidation of several municipalities on Ocean County's barrier island. The second (A-3690) requires "more than 20 hole-and-doughnut towns to combine within 10 years."

The state League of Municipalities opposes both of these bills.

We know this opposition might not be popular with legislators or journalists looking for simple solutions to our property tax crisis. But the opposition is both reasonable and rational.

It is entirely true that efficiency was not the goal of those responsible for the birth of many local governments in our Garden State. Many of the reasons that led to their creation no longer exist today. These current divisions might even work to the disadvantage of a municipality. But this does not provide a mandate for a distant Legislature to dictate wholesale consolidations.

Each situation is unique. Consolidation of services does not always result in lower costs. In many circumstances, it has been shown that consolidating units of government can cost more than leaving them separate. It also has been unequivocally shown that many smaller municipalities cost less to operate than larger municipalities.

People choose to live in a municipality for various reasons. Maybe it is the sociopolitical culture of the municipality. Maybe it is the appearance of the neighborhood they have chosen. Maybe it is the type or character of the school system. Maybe it is because of the quality of municipal services, such as good police protection or a quality library. Maybe it is because of the type and price of housing they seek in that municipality. Maybe it is because their family has lived in that municipality for a long time and there is a sense of tradition.

Whatever the reasons, they have chosen this place as their home. In a democratic society, where change such as this is a matter of free choice, it should be up to the residents to decide if they wish to change their place of residence or merge their hometown with a neighboring municipality.

As was seen in the attempt made in the Princetons in 1996, when their consideration of a consolidation failed, the municipality that would benefit the most financially from the consolidation voted against the question. Why? We do not know for sure. But it seems clear the decision was not based on mere financial criteria.

News stories of several years ago tell much of the story. Many stated that consolidation would save money and should occur. However, when asked if consolidation would be good for their municipality, people offered a uniformly negative response: Consolidation should be imposed on others but not on my municipality.

This tells the whole story.

Legislators should permit the Local Unit Alignment Reorganization and Consolidation Commission to do its work methodically and accurately. Allow the members of the commission to consider the myriad questions concerning the efficiency of providing specific municipal services. Allow specific municipalities to study the question to their own satisfaction to determine if the conditions in their municipality favor consolidation. And let the municipality's residents decide for themselves what is in their own best interests instead of a distant government telling them what is good for them. Is this not one of the reasons we choose to live in a democratic society?

We might need to remind some members of the Legislature that some Americans still believe that "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its power in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

Further, "Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes."

If prudence still matters in this debate, the sponsor might want to tell the rest of us by what measure the towns to be merged are highest in property taxes? And how much will those taxes be cut by the forced consolidation?

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