



Bill may force towns to share

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TRENTON It's been proposed over and over, and in these tough economic times, lawmakers are once again looking at consolidating some of the state's 566 towns as a way to cut costs.

Legislation that would force two dozen so-called "doughnut hole" towns, those encompassed by another municipality, to either consolidate or share services with the surrounding town is being discussed in Trenton.

In Gloucester County, it impact towns such as Swedesboro and Woolwich, as well as National Park and West Deptford.

"While some of these towns share services, some do not," Assemblyman Reed Gusciora, D-Mercer, the bill sponsor, said of the two dozen targeted towns. "There's no reason why many of these towns have separate police departments, fire departments, zoning board, animal control, public works, municipal buildings when, if they were to consolidate, they would save property taxes for many of them."

The legislation, up for discussion last week in an Assembly committee, is another proposal in New Jersey's long history of attempting to curb property taxes in a state with 566 municipalities, 616 school districts, 486 local authorities and 186 fire districts, through consolidations and shared services.

And just like past proposals, it sparked intense opposition from advocacy groups and lawmakers in a state rooted in a tradition of home rule.

"They want to come up with a quick-fix answer to what is a complicated issue," said New Jersey League of Municipalities Executive Director Bill Dressel. "Bigger is not always better."

Consolidation of municipalities comes up time and again as lawmakers and the governor look for ways to cut costs.

Last year, Gov. Jon S. Corzine proposed drastically cutting state aid to small towns to encourage shared services and consolidations.

At the same time, however, a state-commissioned panel was beginning to study the issue, developing criteria to serve as the basis for recommending the merging of specific municipalities, folding agencies or services into municipal or county government or the sharing of services by specific municipalities.

Lawmakers representing small towns argued that the state should wait for the recommendations from that panel, the Local Unit Alignment Reorganization and Consolidation Commission (LUARCC), before jumping the gun. They lobbied the governor for restoration of a portion of the state aid, and the widespread shared service agreements that were expected from the aid cut failed to take shape.

Last week, less than two months from LUARCC's one-year report, opponents of the "doughnut" bill took the same stance.

"They just authorized the creation of the LUARCC commission ... before these folks can even look at these efficiency issues, they want to start consolidating," said Dressel.

Senate Majority Leader Stephen Sweeney, a strong proponent of shared services, said he disagreed with the legislation, which would single out "doughnut hole" municipalities.

"You look at the two towns that we have and they are sharing services," said Sweeney, D-3, of West Deptford. "Swedesboro shares everything with Woolwich ... National Park just shared their police department with Westville."

Sweeney said local governments should be required to prove that they are running efficiently or face financial consequences, such as reductions in state aid.

But he said before that is done, the LUARCC commission should be given the time to carry out its mission.

"The LUARCC commission is working on a plan," he said. "I think that we should allow them to come back."

Lawmakers discussing the "doughnut" legislation which would require shared services or consolidations within 10 years acknowledged the complexity of the issue and the intense opposition that is bound to develop to a sweeping proposal that would force mergers on a group of towns.

Assemblyman Michael Carroll, R-Morris, said he thought the premise would make sense "if we were going back and started from the beginning" of creating New Jersey's municipal boundaries.

"You simply can't ignore 200 years of history," he said.

Meanwhile, the LUARCC Commission is set to submit its one-year report by March 31.

Commission Chairman Jack Fisher, former Gloucester County administrator, said the goal of the panel is to provide the public with an independent view of the issue, free of political whims, and to let residents weigh the pros and cons.

"It's important to establish a base that's credible with the public before you pull a judgment trigger," Fisher said.

The commission is 10 months into its two-year mission to develop criteria to serve as the basis for recommending the merging of specific municipalities and the sharing of services.

Any recommendations would need voter approval in each of the respective towns.

Assemblyman Matt Milam, D-1, of Vineland, hailed that process. He said the final decision should not be left up to a group of lawmakers in the Statehouse.

"The last thing we need is Trenton dictating how we govern our local communities from 105 miles away," Milam said. "If anything, we've learned larger isn't always better, and decisions like this should always be made by voters after careful study."

In his district, the "doughnut" legislation would affect Cape May Point since it is encompassed by the ocean, the Delaware Bay and Lower Township.

The measure (A-3690) was introduced in the Assembly on Feb. 5 and was up only for discussion this week in the Assembly Housing and Local Government Committee. No companion legislation has been introduced in the Senate.

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