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## Advocates for municipal consolidation to hold forums in Union County

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By **Ryan Hutchins/The Star-Ledger**

**UNION COUNTY** — A group planting the seeds of public support for local government consolidation is pushing the idea in several Union County towns.

Courage to Connect New Jersey, which advocates grassroots efforts to affect large-scale municipal consolidation, is — once again — holding forums in the western part of the county, where some suburban communities have embraced shared services.

The group will host a forum Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. at the VFW Hall in Berkeley Heights, where its executive director, Gina Genovese, owns a business. On March 2, she'll talk to Scotch Plains and Fanwood residents at 7:30 p.m. at Brunner Elementary School in Scotch Plains.

"We never go into a town unless we're asked," said Genovese, the former mayor of Long Hill Township and one-time Democratic candidate for state Senate.

Fred Lange invited Genovese to Scotch Plains, where residents will discuss the possibility of consolidation with Fanwood. Lange heard her speak last year and has since become active with the group. Consolidation, he said, is long overdue, especially in his community where a joint school system has operated for years.

"What we're trying to do is combine the rest of town," he said. "It's just not cost effective for us to be separate."

But Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr, a Democrat in her second term, believes consolidation is far from being an immediate answer to the financial struggles of New Jersey's communities.

"We've been pretty consistent locally where we believe the route to go now, where we believe we can achieve savings more immediately, is shared services," Mahr said, noting a shared police dispatch system has saved her borough about \$250,000 over three years.

Scotch Plains has 23,510 residents, and Fanwood has 7,318, according to the 2010 Census. A merged municipality would have far fewer residents than the type of regional townships Courage to Connect is



Jim Wright/For  
The Star-Ledger

Courage to Connect New  
Jersey Executive Director  
Gina Genovese

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pushing.

Genovese said she believes larger towns are stronger and cheaper to run. She'd like to see New Jersey's 566 municipalities reduced to 100 to 125, and she points to Woodbridge — which has 10 distinct sections of town, and nearly 100,000 residents — as an example of what could be done elsewhere.

"We have to make sure that at the end of the day we're left with a strong town," she said.

Fred Lange said he'd like to focus on just Scotch Plains and Fanwood for the time being, but if a larger-scale consolidation were to be discussed, Berkeley Heights would like be in the mix. Genovese will hold a forum there on Wednesday — the second in the town of 13,183.

Republican Mayor Joseph G. Bruno said he welcomes the discussion, though he's focused on shared services right now. Consolidation, he said, is certainly a topic to explore given the deepening fiscal troubles faced by many New Jersey municipalities.

"We all know it's a problem," he said of spending around the state. "There's not a person around who doesn't complaint about taxes and isn't concerned about taxes, but we keep doing things the same way."

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