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EDITORIAL Push New Jersey towns to find way to merge

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Municipal consolidation may be gaining momentum.

Consider some recent events:

The two Princetons have formed a commission to investigate consolidation, the first time the towns will formally sit down and discuss the issue since 1996.

Hightstown and East Windsor have entered discussions to determine if a township police takeover could save the borough money.

State Senate legislation that would merge the tiny borough of Teterboro into four adjacent towns South Hackensack, Little Ferry, Moonachie and Hasbrouck Heights has won committee approval and awaits a vote of the full Senate.

Several hundred residents of the small Camden County borough of Merchantville signed a petition asking borough officials to begin researching a possible merger with neighboring Cherry Hill Township.

And former Gov. Thomas Kean, speaking at a Bergen County forum last month, endorsed consolidation of New Jersey towns to make local government more efficient.

"To consolidate services to really lower property taxes I think the time has come," he told the forum, according to The Record of Hackensack.

All of this comes on the heels of an October poll from Quinnipiac University that showed overwhelming support for municipal and school district consolidations.

And yet, consolidation remains off the table in Trenton, aside from legislation introduced by Assemblyman Reed Gusciora, D-Mercer, that would force the merger of the half dozen towns on Long Beach Island into one town and consolidate all doughnut-and-hole towns such as the Princetons, Hightstown and East Windsor and Jamesburg and Monroe.

From a fiscal standpoint, avoiding the consolidation discussion makes no sense. New Jersey has 566 separate municipalities, nearly 600 school districts, 21 county governments and 200-some-odd fire districts and other taxing entities in the state, creating a mass of bureaucracy and duplicated effort.

Bergen County, which has 70 independent towns, is said to have more fire apparatus than New York City while Jamesburg completely surrounded by Monroe was nearly forced to shut its

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library two years ago.

Historically, the politics have not favored consolidation. Voters have preferred the status quo, repeatedly defeating merger bids at the polls often despite studies showing a tax savings.

That was in the past. Given the state's dire fiscal situation and the impact it is having on towns in the form of reduced aid and the imposition of a hard cap on property taxes, we believe a discussion of consolidation needs to be had at the state level, possibly triggered by hearings on the Gusciora bills.

In addition, a state panel the Local Unit Alignment, Reorganization and Consolidation Commission has been studying mergers and shared services and has issued a number of reports. The Legislature should use the data and begin hearings as soon as it can on broader legislation encouraging consolidation.

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" Why have 50 states? Constitutional questions aside, couldn't we eliminate a lot of bureacracy and waste by eliminating 50 state governments? I think so! So what's wrong with this idea?

It deserves study! "

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