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State Eyes School Consolidations; Could Townships be Next?

Gov. Ed Rendell recently unveiled the state's 2009-2010 budget, and it brought dire news.

With Pennsylvania facing a \$2.3 billion deficit, the governor said he wants to slash almost 3,000 government jobs, possibly more, and reduce or eliminate funding for many other programs and services.

Hard times call for hard measures, Rendell said. And if given the green light, one of those measures would lead to the "full-scale" consolidation of the state's 500 school districts. Ideally, the governor said, Pennsylvania should have no more than 100.

"We just don't need that many school districts, and more importantly, in today's economy, we cannot afford them," he told the General Assembly. "For this reason, I am proposing ... that we establish funds for the creation of a legislative commission to study how best to right-size our local school districts."

On a slippery slope

The message from the governor appears to be that bigger is better. In other words, he is contending that a system of fewer school districts that cover larger chunks of Pennsylvania will be more efficient and keep a lid on property taxes. ➤



Gov. Ed Rendell wants lawmakers to consolidate Pennsylvania's 500 school districts into a neat little bundle of 100. The trouble is, if this bigger-government plan succeeds, the state will have the ammunition it needs to expand the scope of these mergers — and your township could be next.

In theory, this plan to centralize school operations sounds plausible. In reality, experts say, the commonwealth is about to tread on a slippery slope that should concern you as a township resident and taxpayer.

“Between the status quo and consolidation to 100 school districts lies a wide range of other options,” says Lowman Henry, chairman and CEO of the Lincoln Institute of Public Opinion Research, based in Harrisburg. “And while a debate over school district consolidation is healthy, it is one that ought to occur at the local level among willing merger or potential merger partners rather than in the councils of an administration seeking shotgun marriages.”

More important, though, if the plan to consolidate schools succeeds, the state will have the ammunition it needs to expand the scope of these mergers — and your township could be next.

Stop for a moment and imagine what that would be like.

The trouble with big government

Right now, you are represented by a group of township supervisors whom you and your neighbors elected to protect the community’s health, safety, and welfare. These men and women know the township like the back of their hand. They live and very often work there, too. They are fellow taxpayers who have their finger on the moral and philosophical pulse of the township. Your supervisors understand what you, as a resident, want and don’t want.

And if you have a problem or want to discuss an issue, you can phone them at home, stop them at the local diner, or speak up at one of their monthly meetings. “More and smaller units of government mean elected officials represent fewer people,” Henry says.

And that’s a good thing because it ensures the voice of the people is heard. However, that would not be the case if your township were forced to merge or consolidate with another municipality or a group of municipalities. Bigger government would abolish this local, grassroots representation — a key tenet on which this nation was founded — and sweep your community into a complex bureaucratic maze of administrators and automated phone systems.

On top of that, the promised benefits — namely, increased government efficiency and more affordable taxes — would never materialize, says Wendell Cox, a consolidation expert who has studied Pennsylvania’s governing system. In fact, he says, the only thing that forced consolidation would do is spread the higher costs and inefficiencies

of the larger jurisdiction over a larger area.

“When you amalgamate,” Cox says, “it’s not the best that emerges; it’s the worst.”

Working together, saving tax dollars

Still, the state has a plan and is moving forward with it. And the bombshell announcement to consolidate the commonwealth’s school districts is merely the latest incarnation of a strategy to increase the size of Pennsylvania’s government.

For instance, the State Planning Board has been devising ways to make local government operations more “efficient.” Its agenda includes encouraging the General Assembly to create a State Boundary Change Commission, a group that would be tasked with recommending the “reorganization” of local governments.

State lawmakers, too, have introduced legislation to consolidate municipal services and, possibly, municipalities.

These efforts, however, ignore the fact that townships and neighboring municipalities have been working together, formally and informally, for many years to reduce redundancies and save tax dollars. Some co-own equipment and jointly perform road projects. Others share police and fire services.

In fact, the preliminary results of a survey by the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors reveal that hundreds of townships regularly partner with their local government counterparts.

“To merge municipalities and school districts simply to lower their numbers doesn’t make much sense, especially when Pennsylvanians are satisfied with the way things are being handled,” PSATS President Kenneth L. Grimes says. “It’s always been our view that the focus in this debate should be on quality, not quantity. And it’s time we pay more attention to that.”

Lowman Henry agrees: “Skeptics will say the problem is local officials [and their desire] to hold on to their jobs, but consider that school directors serve with no pay, and a majority of township supervisors work for less than \$2,000 a year.

“People who serve in these positions do so out of a sense of community service, not personal enrichment,” he adds. “Such would not be the case if larger, more costly school districts or municipalities replaced the current system. Therefore, this is not about saving money or better educating our children; it is about taking away local control and vesting it in the hands of a few. Bigger is not always better, especially when it is applied to government.”

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