

Is Shared Services the Answer?

By: NJCM Board of Directors Member, Mayor Chuck Chiarello, Buena Vista Township

In an era of declining revenues, tight budgets, and pressure on government to do more with less, the question must be raised "Is Shared Services the Answer?" I have always been a believer that more could be done with shared services on the local and county levels, but it takes creative thinking and requires facilitators. Not every town is capable of sharing services with their neighboring town. Sometimes sharing services does not make economic sense. I have also found that each town wants to know - "What's in it for me?" Who's getting the best deal? Will my taxpayers benefit from this? These are all critical questions and there must be a willingness to discuss the pros and cons of making such arrangements.

In the past, the State of New Jersey has offered incentive grants (mostly used for consultants to be hired) to study the various options in sharing services or consolidating. The process was long and cumbersome and would sometimes lead to a separate grant to study implementation. Most Mayors know that if there is a good deal to be made they should not have to wait a year or two to make it happen. I also believe that there should be "incentives" (financial or otherwise) to help transition into shared services or consolidation agreements. There has been legislation proposed by Senate President Sweeney and others that would make this transition more viable. The biggest concern seems to be that state aid might be cut from towns that don't agree with the shared service or consolidation effort. This has been a big impediment to the legislation.

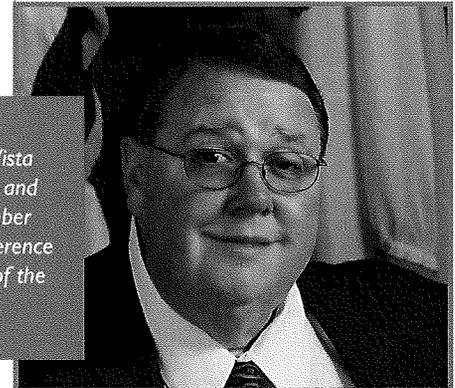
It is time that we put our minds together and work towards a serious approach that will benefit taxpayers in the long run. There is no overnight cure. Shared services,

consolidation, or other cost savings measures are long-term actions where benefits/savings may not be seen for a number of years down the road.

The county level of government should be seriously looked at on a statewide basis as an umbrella for shared services. There are excellent models in both Somerset and Gloucester Counties for leaders to look at. It is possible that County Government could be a "one-stop" clearing house in "facilitating" this process. County-wide Dispatching, shared EMS services, purchasing, and public works offer tremendous opportunities for mu-

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The LUARCC Commission (Local Unit Alignment, Reorganization and Consolidation Commission) was established to help facilitate the kind of shared services and/or consolidations efforts that I have spoken about. The powers and financial recourses of LUARCC have been very limited. No mayor wants anyone telling them how to handle their business, but they should be at least open to solid suggestions. Legislative efforts are being proposed to head in this direction. Many mayors are willing to consider options, but do not



nicipal government. There are other areas that should be looked at including our local courts. Health and welfare issues have long been handled on the county level and have proven successful.

It takes cooperation, and as I mentioned earlier in this article "facilitators" to make all this happen. The New Jersey Department of Community Affairs and county level government are best suited for this facilitator role. There are many common sense issues of sharing services that have been long lost to "Home Rule" in New Jersey. I believe that almost every town can keep its own identity while thinking smart and showing their taxpayers that we are progressive leaders.

want to be punished if they do not follow decisions reached by LUARCC. Legislators should have trust in local officials to do the right thing when the situation warrants.

As a part-time small town Mayor with what seems like full-time responsibilities it is difficult to find enough hours in the day to both lead your community and explore all the shared services options that might be available. My suggestion is to keep an open mind and to remember that times will not likely get that much better in the future. We will need to think outside of the box! 🍷