

Key area issues ignore municipal boundaries

Opinion by Eric Menzer *York*

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Crime, traffic and stormwater runoff. What do they have in common? All are issues in the metropolitan York area that ignore municipal boundaries.

Criminals, cars, and water have no idea where our township, borough and city lines start and stop. And they all are issues that are being examined and debated by Metro York the initiative of YorkCounts.

Metro York is an effort to find voluntary steps that elected officials in the metropolitan York area could take to make our community function more cohesively and to grow in a way that ensures the very quality of life and economic prosperity that makes this such a great place to live.

We're not yet complete with our process of listening to nationally-recognized experts, government officials and local residents who have offered ideas to reach these goals. But a few things are becoming clear.

The old stereotypes that said people in this community aren't interested in working together on a regional basis should be discarded. At every step, elected and appointed officials from townships and boroughs throughout the metropolitan York area have made it very clear that they understand these issues and are ready to put aside short-term interests in favor of the long-term health of their community.

They understand that acting alone in a little box they cannot control their future. Our participants have heard major presentations from some of the people who are involved in the current effort to consolidate fire services between Spring Garden and Springettsbury Township.

They have heard local police chiefs present a fact-laden case for why there needs to be a greater regionalization of police services to combat crime in a better way on a regional basis -- not just to save money, but to more effectively investigate and solve crimes.

Such feelings are not restricted to elected officials. We have seen plenty of evidence that so-called "average citizens" understand very clearly that when decision-making about land-use, education, infrastructure investment and other government functions is fragmented and dissipated the way it is in Pennsylvania, they actually have less control of their future, not more.

We also are learning that there are very clear practical solutions that we might pursue that do not discard what is good about our local government structure but rather recognize that the world has changed, and that much of what happens in our region is not contained in our small municipal boxes.

As an example, it has little consequence outside of any borough if that borough chooses to permit or restrict the location of business signs through their zoning ordinance. But it has a huge impact if that borough chooses to permit a 400-home subdivision that pours traffic onto a street in a neighboring township -- and those township voters have no say.

Land-use regulation does not need to be an "all or nothing" proposition between local government and the York County Planning Commission.

We could examine and plan for regional impacts at a regional level and still allow local governments to have a significant say about many aspects of their zoning and land development ordinances.

Further we have heard very clearly that a system that pours rapid residential growth -- and the taxpayer burden that goes with it -- into certain school districts and allows others to reap the benefits of most of the commercial tax-base growth is manifestly unfair and detrimental to our community.

We have heard from individuals instrumental in bringing forms of revenue sharing that benefited all communities in counties across the country, and from others such as the Pennsylvania Economy League who are working to achieve that same type of regional funding plan right here in Pennsylvania.

Finally, our workgroups have heard that a system that constantly has to build new roads, sewers, police stations, libraries, parks and schools on the outer edge of our metro area while struggling to maintain those assets in our older communities makes no sense to them.

They tell us that principles of common sense and frugality dictate that we "fix it first" that we take care of what we have already built before duplicating it all over again, at great expense.

Change does not come easily in a commonwealth with a rich tradition of small government that is said to be "close to the people."

But we see those people as ready for change that allows our community to fight crime, plan roads, improve stormwater systems and educate our kids in a fashion that saves taxpayer dollars.

They are ready for a change that spends those precious dollars in a more effective manner, maintains our existing communities, saves open space and produces a community that builds and attracts growing companies and the jobs they bring with them.

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