

Pennsylvanians want regionalization, but need a little push

Editorial: Paul Golias
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Over the last several years, there has been ample favorable comment from citizens of Luzerne County, in response to news articles, editorials and this column, that regionalization appears to be something positive. Many e-mail messages to this columnist provide anecdotal evidence that people see a benefit in towns coming together on such basic services as police and fire protection.

The Pennsylvania Economy League, which works with local government to analyze situations and effect change, has found in its surveys that citizens really don't care what name is on the police car that responds to the emergency. The people do expect a response and they appreciate it when the responder is a trained professional.

Now comes the survey results from 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, a group that hopes to make local government more efficient.

As reported last week in The Sunday Voice, a whopping 95 percent of Pennsylvanians surveyed believe that local governments should collectively plan economic development efforts, transportation improvements and open space preservation. About 90 percent want a requirement that towns coordinate new development to reduce flooding from heavy rains.

This number is stunning and it should awaken the ghosts in Kingston Township and Dallas Township where officials balked at signing on to a regional plan covering just those issues. Even worse, the townships quit the Back Mountain Council of Governments which provided a forum for regional discussions. Ironically, development in Dallas Township is being eyed as the cause of flooding in Kingston Township!

An overwhelming 84 percent of respondents to the survey favor regional police departments. Several such initiatives in Luzerne County have hit road bumps; Plymouth Borough and Wyoming Borough are being encouraged to reenter talks in their respective areas.

More than 70 percent of voters said they would support elected officials who support the regionalization of municipal services.

County Commissioner Todd Vonderheid said "antiquated state laws" must be changed to help communities form regional police departments, and state Rep. John Yudichak, chair of the Luzerne County Municipal Cooperation Commission, wants more state grant money to encourage local government cooperation. Yudichak has been working mightily to foster regionalization as a means of providing higher quality services and mitigating the growing budget-balancing woes of cities, boroughs and townships.

Given the 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania survey results, and the reluctance of many

local officials to seriously pursue regional cooperation, and the fact that time is Northeastern Pennsylvania's enemy as other regions of the commonwealth position themselves to prosper, maybe we need another approach.

Maybe we need our state Legislature to mandate regionalization. Maybe we need experts to tell us the most efficient size of a police department, for example, and then mandate the creation of such departments. Maybe we need further consolidation of school districts. Maybe we need a state mandate that one town can't allow development that floods neighboring municipalities.

Maybe, in the Big Picture context, we need a Big Push to be saved from ourselves

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