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DEAR READER: Cooperation makes for better government

New Castle News

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By Mitchel Olszak

If you were to pick out a new car to buy, how would you go about doing it? Would you hire someone to build it from scratch, piece by piece? Or would you opt for one constructed on an assembly line? Unless you are very rich and very picky, you will wind up with an assembly-line model. For most of us, a handcrafted automobile is well beyond our price range. And you would like to drive it now, not in several years. Our consumer society relies on a production technique called economy of scale. Goods made in large quantities with a high degree of worker specialization are far cheaper than items produced one at a time. If economies of scale work in the private sector, why can't they work in the public sector? Actually, they can — if they are properly managed. Municipal services in Pennsylvania are delivered mainly through a combination of cities, boroughs and townships. There are, to be precise, 2,565 of these entities in the commonwealth. That's a lot, and the number breeds certain inefficiencies that wind up costing tax dollars and discouraging development. This was the general topic of last week's meeting of the Lawrence County Regional Council of Governments. This voluntary organization of county municipalities exists to find ways to share services and cut costs. It symbolizes the sort of cooperation and efficiency that's sorely lacking in Pennsylvania. The meeting included discussions of recent reports on Pennsylvania and why it remains economically challenged. While some areas of the state are experiencing growth, many — including this region — continue to struggle and even lose ground. Lawrence County, for instance, has been losing population for decades. After the 2010 census, it will likely drop from a fifth- to a sixth-class county. Reports put out by the Brookings Institution and the Pennsylvania Economy League seek to examine why so much of Pennsylvania is economically stagnant. The answer is complex, but the studies concluded that the artificial boundaries created by so many small municipalities are major impediments to progress. Pennsylvania allows municipalities to merge and form larger entities. But that rarely happens as inertia, provincialism and politics stand in the way. But there are cooperative efforts short of merger that allow municipalities to either cut costs or provide services they could not otherwise afford. The council of governments, for instance, allows member municipalities to join in bulk purchases of materials as a way to save money. It also can assist with planning and other ventures that small municipalities might not attempt on their own. There are other examples of intergovernmental cooperation, such as the Northwest Lawrence Regional Police Department, which serves both Pulaski and Mahoning townships. And various municipalities, in one way or another, have joined forces to cooperate on sewer systems. Still, there is so much more that can be done along these lines. The Brookings and Economy League reports and their critique of Pennsylvania's economic situation offer good reasons for exploring cooperative ventures. Such efforts, however, don't just happen. They require local officials willing to put in the time and effort necessary to lay the groundwork. And it doesn't hurt to have informed and engaged citizens and businesses with an understanding of the advantages of efficient government.

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