

Local Government Fragmentation

By any measure, Northeastern Pennsylvania has too many governing bodies. There are 28 government entities for every 100,000 people in northeastern Pennsylvania compared to 6.1 nationally. What's more, there are 76 municipalities in Luzerne County, despite a population of 213,295. While this approach may have been an effective means of governing more than 50 years ago, today it leads to significant inefficiencies.

Many of our communities are failing. They are either in Act 42 or nearing Act 42 status (essentially, bankruptcy) because of the cost of providing vital services to their residents and businesses. How is a community of 3,400 going to provide effective public safety and other municipal services without finding new sources of revenue (raising taxes, and new or increased fees, etc.)? Luzerne County should not have 76 police departments, 76 trash departments, and 76 contracts for outside trash services. There should not be 76 city halls operating.

Our communities should follow a business model to operate — consolidation of programs, services, and some administrative functions! Efficiencies are increased through some level of consolidation and coordination. Communities across the nation are consolidating at differing levels for more efficient and effective operations. Luzerne County has begun looking at this issue by attempting to have one tax collector/agency for the entire county. This is an excellent start, but we need to go beyond this measure.

The Luzerne County Government Cooperation Commission is attempting to pull communities together for shared services. The National League of Cities has programs that help communities become part of national buying pools for goods, services, and equipment. The League has recognized and recommended to governments that they should be smaller, work together, and act as a tool in a community, not rule the community.

In order to maximize savings, our northeastern Pennsylvania communities need to seriously discuss collaborating. We must get beyond the fear of loss of power, control, and individual egos and move toward a system that is best for the residents and businesses in northeastern PA. We share the advantages and disadvantages of our location and size already; let's share in the resolution of our problems and grow strong together.

Besides the fiscal issues impacting our communities, another negative impact of government fragmentation is demonstrated in economic development. There are several new large-scale developments that overlap jurisdictions. Why would a new business want to locate here if a building or piece of land is located in two or more communities? That business would have to deal with overlapping and (sometimes conflicting) regulations and processes, just to open its doors, making the project more costly as well.

Chicago and Denver have faced similar issues and formed Metro Mayors' councils in their respective regions to examine more effective governance in the long — and short-term. By collaborating, these cities have the opportunity to work on issues that impact more than one jurisdiction. This concept can be duplicated on several levels. On the county level, Luzerne and Lackawanna counties could schedule joint, quarterly County Commissioner Meetings. A formal northeastern Pennsylvania City Manager/Administrator/Supervisor Association could be formed to facilitate cooperation among the cities, boroughs, municipalities, and townships.

How many of us can say we live, work, and purchase all of our goods and services in one community? Not many. Our communities are small and no one community can address all our needs. This demonstrates the economic interdependence prevailing in our region and is yet another reason why we must take action. We have the power to make our local governments as effective and efficient as possible to enhance our own quality of life and standard of living. We the people should demand it!

JUSC is a research-based think tank founded by Wilkes University. In partnership with College Misericordia, King's College, Luzerne County Community College, Penn State/Wilkes-Barre, and the University of Scranton, JUSC was formed to educate, strategize, and convene on urban renewal, community, and economic development.

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