

Local Government Cooperation and Consolidation

One of Pennsylvania's claims to fame is its large number of local governments and governmental jurisdictions– the second largest number of such units of any state in the U.S. The majority of Pennsylvania's 2,567 municipalities (which include boroughs, townships, and cities) are relatively small; thirty percent have less than 1,000 residents, and another 29 percent have between 1,000 and 2,500 residents. The sheer number and small size of municipalities means local government in Pennsylvania is relatively close to citizens, allowing residents easy access and opportunity to make their voices heard. On the other hand, this patchwork quilt of governments sometimes makes coordination difficult for issues with regional impact, such as urban sprawl, water quality and supply, transportation, and land use. Some small governments have difficulty finding enough volunteers to serve on essential government boards and commission.

There have been suggestions that Pennsylvania local governments would be more effective and efficient if there were fewer of them, allowing better coordination of public services, larger-scale planning, and avoiding duplication of services. In addition, many important public issues facing Pennsylvania communities cannot be addressed solely at the municipal level because they cross municipal boundaries; these include growth management, water quality and quantity, transportation infrastructure, economic development, and emergency preparedness.

General discussions about the benefit of having fewer but larger local governments particularly have occurred in relation to land use issues, such as growth management and farmland preservation.

Pennsylvania law allows municipalities voluntarily to merge together in a process called consolidation, but this occurs very infrequently. It requires a general plan for how to merge the affected governments, with final approval from the voters in each of the municipalities.

Typically, only one or two such consolidations are even considered a year in Pennsylvania.

There are other less formal methods of coordinating policy responses to improve cost efficiency and to address multi-community and regional issues than consolidation. Indeed, many Pennsylvania local governments already voluntarily cooperate with neighboring municipalities in the provision of police, fire protection, and road services. Greater cooperation and coordination across municipal boundaries can provide many of the same cost savings possible with consolidation without the loss of local autonomy.

It is important to consider how Pennsylvanian's view local government cooperation and consolidation. The limited number of consolidations that occur might suggest either that taxpayers and citizens do not view consolidation favorably, or that local officials are loathe to give up power and hence rarely give their citizens a formal choice about consolidating with neighboring municipalities. This report uses the results of a 2001 statewide survey of Pennsylvania citizens to examine citizens' attitudes towards local government consolidation and cooperation.

The Citizens' Viewpoint Surveys

The availability of data from a 2001 statewide survey of Pennsylvania citizens can provide information about how Pennsylvania citizens view consolidation between local governments. In 2001, the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology at Penn State surveyed 4183 Pennsylvanians seeking information on their opinions about their concerns. Included on these Citizens' Viewpoint surveys were questions addressing issues of local governance, cooperation, and consolidation.

General Attitudes Towards Consolidation of Local Governments

The respondents in 2001 were asked whether they believed local governments in Pennsylvania should consolidate with neighboring municipalities to improve their efficiency and cut costs. The question as worded is somewhat biased because it only mentions potential benefits of consolidation, so the responses likely are biased favorably towards consolidation. Its important to keep this in mind when interpreting the respondents' answers.

The respondents generally were in favor of municipal consolidation, with about half responding they thought local governments should consolidate, and only 23 percent disagreed (see Table 1). About 26 percent of the respondents were undecided, which suggests that many people were uncertain about the benefits and costs of consolidation.

Older respondents were somewhat more likely to believe local governments should consolidate than were younger respondents (see Table 2). The latter were more likely to be undecided than were older respondents.

Respondents with more education were less likely to be undecided about consolidation than were respondents with less education. About 22 percent of the respondents with a four year

college degree or more were undecided about consolidation, compared to 32 percent of the respondents who did not finish high school (see Table 3). And yet the percentage of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with consolidation did not vary dramatically by education.

Where respondents lived also was associated with attitudes towards consolidation. Respondents living in cities generally were most likely to believe that governments should consolidate, while respondents living on farms, in the country, in rural towns or villages, or the suburbs were more likely to disagree with consolidation than were respondents living in cities (see Table 4). It is important to note that even in the rural areas, more respondents were in favor of consolidation than were opposed to it.

*Attitudes About Their **Own** Local Government*

The respondents clearly indicated that in general they favor the idea of consolidation, at least as a concept. But are their attitudes the same when it comes to their *own* local government and the location in which they live? The survey asked respondents what they thought their own specific local government should do in relation to other local governments. When asked in regards to their own local government, the respondents were much less favorable towards consolidation. Only 11 percent of the respondents thought their own local government should consolidate with neighboring municipalities, while another 20 percent thought the government should remain a totally separate and independent entity (see Table 5). Half of the respondents thought their local government should cooperate with neighboring municipalities in planning and/or service provision.

Older respondents were more likely to believe their local government should remain totally separate from other governments than were younger respondents, while conversely, younger respondents were more likely to believe their government should cooperate with neighboring municipalities (see Table 6). There was little difference across the age groups in attitudes towards consolidation itself.

Respondents with more education similarly were more likely to believe their local government should cooperate with neighbors than were respondents with less education. About 56 percent of the respondents with a graduate degree or graduate work wanted their government to cooperate, compared to only 36 percent of respondents who did not finish high school (see Table 7). Most of this difference in attitude occurs because those with less education were much more likely to say they did not know than were other respondents. Attitudes towards remaining totally separate and towards consolidation did not vary much by education.

Where respondents lived was not strongly related to their attitudes towards cooperation, but was associated with whether they wanted their government to remain separate or to consolidate with others. Respondents living on farms or in the country were more likely to want their government to remain totally separate than were respondents living in other locations (see Table 8). Conversely, respondents living in cities were more likely to want consolidation than were respondents living in suburban or rural areas. Respondents from small cities were the most likely to say they wanted consolidation.

Summary

The responses to the survey indicated that most Pennsylvanians had mixed attitudes towards government consolidation. The majority of Pennsylvania citizens in principal like consolidation, but not for their own specific municipality. It was not possible with the survey responses to determine why this difference occurred.

Pennsylvania citizens generally were very supportive of their local government cooperating with neighboring local governments, and thus of municipalities working more closely together. Cooperation allows many of the benefits of consolidation without the loss of autonomy. It is important to note that several studies have found that many Pennsylvania local governments already collaborate, particularly on fire protection, police, and other services (see Kelsey and Lembeck, 1996).

It also is important to note that a sizeable minority of citizens do not know how they felt about consolidation in general (26 percent), or what their own local government should do (19 percent). This would suggest that greater education about local government, and the benefits and costs of cooperation and consolidation is needed.

References:

Kelsey, Timothy W. and Stanford M. Lembeck. "Local Officials Look at Pennsylvania Local Government: Changing Municipal Relationships." Extension Circular Six. Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology. Cooperative Extension, The Pennsylvania State University. May, 1996.

Prepared by:

Timothy Kelsey http://www.aers.psu.edu/d/fac/kelsey.htm	(814-865-9542)	(tkelsey@psu.edu)
Fern K. (Bunny) Willits http://www.aers.psu.edu/d/fac/willits.htm	(814-863-8647)	(fkw@psu.edu)
Martin Shields http://www.aers.psu.edu/d/fac/shields.htm	(814) 865-0659	(mxs20@psu.edu)
Stanford M. Lembeck http://www.aers.psu.edu/d/fac/lembeck.htm	(814-863-8631)	(sml1@psu.edu)
Mario Picon		(mgp136@psu.edu)

The Pennsylvania State University is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. It is the policy of the University to maintain an academic and work environment free of discrimination, including harassment. The Pennsylvania State University prohibits discrimination and harassment against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Discrimination or harassment against faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated at The Pennsylvania State University. Direct all inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policy to the Affirmative Action Director, The Pennsylvania State University, 201 Willard Building, University Park, PA 16802-2801, Tel 814-865-4700/V, 814-863-1150/TTY.

Table 1. Local Governments in Pennsylvania Should Consolidate to Improve Efficiency and Cut Costs				
Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
12%	39%	26%	19%	4%

Table 2. Local Governments in Pennsylvania Should Consolidate to Improve Efficiency and Cut Costs, by Age

Age	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Less than 34	9%	39%	30%	20%	2%
35-44	9	36	30	22	3
45-54	11	38	24	21	6
55-64	12	41	24	18	5
65-74	16	36	26	18	4
75 or older	14	44	22	16	4

Table 3. Local Governments in Pennsylvania Should Consolidate to Improve Efficiency and Cut Costs, by Education

Education	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Did not finish High School	9%	38%	32%	15%	6%
High School graduate/GED	10	39	29	18	4
Some college	11	41	25	18	4
4 Year college degree	12	39	22	22	5
Graduate work or Graduate degree	16	34	22	25	3

Table 4. Local Governments in Pennsylvania Should Consolidate to Improve Efficiency and Cut Costs, by Place of Residence

Place of Residence	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Large city	17%	38%	30%	11%	4%
Medium city	9	43	30	14	3
Small city	16	42	22	16	4
Suburban	11	38	25	21	6
Rural town/village	11	39	26	20	4
Country (non-farm)	9	36	27	23	4
Farm	7	38	17	30	8

Table 5. “My Local Government in Pennsylvania Should...”	
“...Remain a totally separate and independent entity”	20%
“...Cooperate with neighboring municipalities in planning and/or provision of services”	50%
“...Merge or consolidate with neighboring municipalities”	11%
Don't know	19%

Table 6. “My Local Government in Pennsylvania Should.....,” by Age				
Age	“...Remain totally separate”	“...Cooperate with neighboring municipalities”	“...Merge or consolidate with neighboring municipalities”	Don’t know
Less than 34	13%	56%	11%	20%
35-44	18	54	12	16
45-54	21	51	10	18
55-64	22	46	12	19
65-74	23	45	12	20
75 or older	21	46	11	22

Table 7. “My Local Government in Pennsylvania Should....,” by Education				
Education	“...Remain totally separate”	“...Cooperate with neighboring municipalities”	“...Merge or consolidate with neighboring municipalities”	Don’t know
Did not finish High School	19%	36%	10%	35%
High School graduate/GED	22	44	10	24
Some college	21	49	12	17
4 Year college degree	17	63	11	10
Graduate work or Graduate degree	18	56	13	13

Table 8. “My Local Government in Pennsylvania Should....,” by Place of Residence				
Place of Residence	“...Remain totally separate”	“...Cooperate with neighboring municipalities”	“...Merge or consolidate with neighboring municipalities”	Don’t know
Large city	16%	49%	15%	21%
Medium city	21	45	12	22
Small city	17	45	18	19
Suburban	21	54	11	14
Rural town/village	18	51	10	21
Country (non-farm)	24	45	7	23
Farm	32	49	5	14

file:Local government.wpd