Pennsylvania Township News

Change is Brewing

ALARMING TRENDS Emerge as Groups Push for Local Government REFORM
Restructuring Local Government
DRASTIC TIMES
Call for DRASTIC MEASURES,
Local Government Reformists Say

But Are PA’s Local Governments
REALLY at the Root of its Problems?

BY JILL ERCOLINO / ASSISTANT EDITOR

IT ALL STARTED BACK IN 2003, WHEN THE BROOKINGS
Institution released a report that blamed Pennsylvania’s ills on its “fragmented” system of
local governments. Since then, special-interest groups and new studies have emerged to
tout the need for more effective governing. The emphasis of late has been on regionalizing
“high-quality” services, such as police and fire protection, sharing tax revenues, and
merging municipalities — when it makes sense, of course. But is all of this truly an attempt
to make Pennsylvania more efficient, business-friendly, and safer? Or are we on a slippery
slope to bigger government? You decide.

Local government reformists want Pennsylvania to stream-
line its current governing system, made up of 2,500-plus
townships, cities, and boroughs. Their plan, an aggressive
one, calls on local officials to look beyond their boundaries
and be more receptive to regionalizing services, including
police and fire protection, sharing tax dollars, and even
merging and consolidating their communities. Some won-
der, however, if the problems that reformists see are real
or merely perceived.
It is a radical plan, and Von Hause, a supervisor for Lumber Township in Cameron County, doesn’t like it at all.

The idea goes something like this: Eliminate many of the county’s elected officials, including the commissioners, the township supervisors, the borough council members, and the mayors, and replace them with a single governing body.

This nine-member council and a full-time manager, operating under a home rule charter, would oversee the roads, the police and fire departments, health and human service programs, and land use planning in the region. But above all else, supporters say, the consolidated government would lift the debt-ridden county out of its economic decline by removing duplicated services, streamlining operations, and slashing taxes by as much as $500,000 a year.

But Hause, a 28-year veteran of local government, points out that the county’s five townships aren’t the ones in financial straits. For instance, Lumber Township has raised property taxes just three times in the past three decades and its levy is a mere 5 mills compared to the county’s 25 mills.

“Could things be better? Yes, but we’re all in pretty good shape,” he says, “Sure, we have to sacrifice to make ends meet. That means we buy good, used equipment instead of new, but the residents are happy with what they have. Why change it?”

Hause also isn’t convinced that centralizing decision making and services in this county of 5,500 residents — or anywhere else, for that matter — will solve problems. Instead, he believes, it will create more.

“The bigger the government,” he says, “the bigger the mess.”

Others agree.

“Look at Philadelphia,” says Lowman Henry, CEO of the Lincoln Institute, a Harrisburg-based public opinion research group. “It’s Pennsylvania’s biggest city. Who wants to aspire to that?”

When local government reformists look into their crystal ball, they see a dim future for Pennsylvania. And they attribute many of its problems — slow growth, financially strapped cities, and the lack of high-paying jobs — to one thing: the commonwealth’s “fragmented” governing system. As a result, reformists are looking for more municipal cooperation and consolidation and urging lawmakers to institute changes that could have a dramatic effect on the way your township does business.
“These groups have been taking a sound-good, feel-good approach to changing local government, and it’s all very convincing. But are the problems they talk so passionately about real or perceived?”

“...services that should be performed at the local level are lost,” says supervisor Joseph Brennan, who recently moved to Highland Township in Adams County after spending 40 years in Montgomery County, Md. “Regionalization considers the masses, not the individual.”

“I am furious about the way townships are being squeezed to regionalize,” adds Kayle Woods, secretary of Damascus Township in Wayne County. “Townships are something you can feel good about — and who has too many things to feel good about anymore?

“I’m just not willing to give up any form of government that makes a lot of sense,” she says. “Township government works.”

Woods is onto something, according to a report on bigger government by the Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington, a Seattle-based nonprofit.

“The evidence from various studies has led many researchers to conclude that the least expensive local governments are found in complex systems of small and medium-sized municipalities that both compete and cooperate with one another,” the study says.

‘The timing is right for reform’

Nevertheless, ever since the Brookings Institution released a pivotal report in 2003, there has been a steady and organized push in Pennsylvania to reform governing.

Local governing, that is.

Behind it all is a core group of special interests and others that claim the current “fragmented” system, made up of 2,500-plus townships, boroughs, and cities, wastes tax dollars, duplicates services, and tangles up business owners who want to set up shop or expand.

Meanwhile, they say, many of the commonwealth’s urban areas and “core communities” are watching their tax bases shrink as they struggle to pay the bills.

Reformists, representing such groups as the State Planning Board, 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, and The Campaign to Renew Pennsylvania, predict a dismal future for the commonwealth if action isn’t taken soon. Their money-stretching strategy includes regionalizing services, including police and fire departments, sharing tax revenues, and merging and consolidating municipalities — when it makes sense, of course.

“The timing is right for reform,” Renew Pennsylvania’s Director of Strategy Todd Vonderheid wrote in a recent editorial. “[Lawmakers] are open to change and looking for ways to reform property taxes and provide better services. We have a rare opportunity to make these common-sense ideas a reality.”

Make no mistake, change is brewing. What form it will take is anybody’s guess. However, alarming trends are emerging here and elsewhere that should make every township official sit up and take notice.

For instance, in Indiana, townships are fighting to stay alive thanks to initiatives such as Indianapolis Works, an aggressive plan to revitalize the city and surrounding Marion County by merging police and fire departments and eliminating local government.

Reform efforts, under such names

THOUGHTS ON REFORMING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The reformist view: Pennsylvania’s local governments — its 2,500-plus townships, cities, and boroughs — must come together for the greater good of the commonwealth’s economic future. That means they must look beyond their boundaries and take meaningful steps to regionalize services, including police and fire protection, share tax revenues, and merge and consolidate when necessary.

PSATS’ view: Intergovernmental cooperation and even mergers and consolidations can be beneficial if they are voluntary and locally driven. In fact, in Pennsylvania, there are hundreds of examples of townships that have worked with neighboring municipalities to perform projects and purchase materials. On the other hand, PSATS does not support collaborations that would usurp resources from one community for the benefit of another, as regional tax revenue sharing would do.
CHANGE IS BREWING

as Metro-York and Renew Lehigh Valley, are taking shape in Pennsylvania, too. And just look at the events that unfolded this past year in Cameron County, where local officials aren’t buying the argument that drastic times call for drastic measures.

Anger and mistrust

In certain parts of Cameron County, consolidation is a reviled word; however, in the county seat of Emporium, the concept is being embraced with open arms. There, the county commissioners are all for the idea of replacing the region’s scattered governing bodies with a single council that would oversee the region.

“It makes sense that all of us working together, no longer having imaginary lines stopping us, would serve all residents of Cameron County in a much more cost-efficient manner,” Commissioner Pat Rodgers told a local reporter last summer.

The state has backed the proposal, too.

In fact, Secretary of Community and Economic Development Dennis Yablonsky has promised at least $1 million for several economic development projects if the county establishes the new governing system. Lance Simmens, Gov. Ed Rendell’s local government liaison, says the state’s goal from the outset has been to help Cameron County become a “model for change.”

The ultimate decision, though, rested in the hands of the elected officials in the county’s two boroughs, Driftwood and Emporium, and five townships, Lumber, Gibson, Grove, Portage, and Shippen. Under Pennsylvania law, all of them had to agree to place the consolidation question on the November 2007 ballot or it would die.

At a turbulent meeting last July, where long-simmering anger bubbled to the surface, the municipalities shot the referendum down. One township and one borough favored letting the voters decide, four townships opposed the idea, and one borough tabled the decision.

Simmens was there, says it wasn’t pretty, and thinks he knows why the municipalities couldn’t agree. “There was a very palpable feeling that the proposal on the table was being pushed down their throats,” he says.

“And when it gets to that point, you lose the ability to have a rational discussion,” says Alan Kugler of PA Futures, the consultant who formulated the county’s consolidation plan. “Then it becomes about ‘them and us’ and who the enemy is.”

Phil Brown, a supervisor for Shippen Township, the lone township to approve placing the referendum on the ballot, agrees that mistrust overshadowed the proceedings. In the weeks and months leading up to the vote, officials and residents began to wonder who was really behind the move to consolidate, he says. Was it the commissioners? Or was it Harrisburg?

Regardless, Brown believes that residents should have been able to decide the county’s fate. “I’m not 100 percent convinced that consolidation is a good thing,” he says, “but I don’t think I have the right to tell residents they can’t vote on this.”

Lumber Township’s Von Hause, president of the Cameron County Association of Township Officials, has been a vocal critic of the consolidation plan since its inception. He says it would have hurt his constituents, who would have lost their local representation. On top of that, the plan would have been a blow to Pennsylvania’s local governments.

“This isn’t consolidation; it’s the elimination of local government, the government closest to the people. Besides,” he says, “if this is such a doggone

For decades, municipalities across Pennsylvania have been working together, sometimes on nothing more than a handshake, to save money on projects and purchases. However, reformists want even more local officials to reach beyond their boundaries and embrace such concepts as regionalization and tax sharing. They say that centralizing services and spreading the wealth around will make Pennsylvania more efficient and attractive to new residents and new businesses.
good idea, why don’t they start by doing it in Harrisburg?”

Since the vote, Simmens has made a few more trips to Cameron County to help local leaders come up with an alternative that everyone can support. So far, he has come up empty-handed, although the commissioners have talked about reviving the consolidation plan.

“We’re not saying that consolidation is the only way out of the problem,” Simmens says, “but this would have been a major step.”

Still, as one newspaper covering the events put it: “If one of the smallest and least populated counties in the state bogs down when it comes to consolidation, imagine how long the odds are with Allegheny County and Pittsburgh.”

A different approach

While the Cameron County consolidation plan may be radical for our times, if you take a look back, precedent for centralized government exists in Pennsylvania. All you have to do is study the history of Philadelphia.

In 1951, several decades after the city merged with Philadelphia County and abolished a patchwork of townships and boroughs, the region began operating under a home rule charter that put a mayor and 17-member council in charge.

Sound familiar? So if the Cameron County plan isn’t anything new, why talk about it?

Well, it’s symbolic of growing sentiment in the commonwealth that we need to take a second look at how we govern. Despite the positive findings of at least one expert on our governing system and the fact that many municipalities are financially healthy and working together, reformists have taken a dimmer view of the state of affairs.

They say that growth in Pennsylvania is slow — the population increased by just 500,000 between 1970 and 2003 — and that we’re losing high-paying jobs and skilled young workers. And they say that unless far-reaching functional and structural changes are implemented to make townships, cities, and boroughs more efficient, business-friendly, and safer, the commonwealth will continue its downward spiral.

“We have this legacy in Pennsylvania that has created barriers to economic development and to the delivery of high-quality services at the best possible cost,” says Judith Schwank, CEO and president of 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, a group encouraging more government efficiency. She also is chairman of the State Planning Board and a former Berks County commissioner.

“The number of municipalities isn’t the problem,” she adds. “It’s the consistency. There are so many rules that businesses have to wade through.”

Todd Vonderheid of Renew Pennsylvania, an arm of 10,000 Friends, agrees: “Our current structure hinders economic growth in some places.

“We’re not saying that every place has to change, but in today’s system of boxes, service delivery isn’t working well,” notes Vonderheid, who also heads up the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry and is a former Luzerne County commissioner.

Of course, when talking about pro-

“Harrisburg has a $59 million general fund budget and 48,000 people. Lower Paxton Township has a $19 million budget and 46,000 people. Now, who gets the bigger bang for the buck?”
posed reforms, special interests have been careful to embrace such words as “voluntary” and “optional” and shun such phrases as “bigger government” and “better government.” However, PSATS President Dick Hadley says it’s abundantly clear that they have their sights set on townships and the way they do business.

But he and others wonder if reformists are on the right path to solving Pennsylvania’s problems.

“These groups have been taking a sound-good, feel-good approach to changing local government,” Hadley says, “and it’s all very convincing. But are the problems they talk so passionately about real or perceived? And who’s to say that Pennsylvania has too many local governments? If 2,500-plus is too many, can someone please tell me what the right number is?

“The bottom line is, townships have their house in order. We’re providing services at lower costs and holding the line on taxes. If we really want to make changes, let’s look at the state and the cities.”

Is Pennsylvania’s glass half empty or half full?

PSATS Executive Board member Bill Hawk is a supervisor for Lower Paxton Township in Dauphin County, which skirts the City of Harrisburg. He agrees that reformists should focus their efforts on the state’s urban areas, which are rampant with high crime rates and taxes, rather than pushing for change in outlying rural and suburban municipalities.

“Harrisburg has a $59 million general fund budget and 48,000 people. Lower Paxton Township has a $19 million budget and 46,000 people. Now, who gets the bigger bang for the buck?” Hawk asks “The cities have dug their own hole, and now they are caught in the crosshairs and don’t know how to get out.”

In fact, to some, local government reformists are nothing more than modern-day Robin Hoods, whose un-

One township’s story:
A merger that made sense

Karyle Woods has traveled around the world and says it doesn’t get any better than the good, old United States.

“It’s very comforting to wake up in the morning and be under the same government that was there the night before,” says Woods, the secretary for Damascus Township in Wayne County.

Still, she is troubled by the growing interest in Pennsylvania to merge and consolidate local governments. “Just because business wants to deal with one entity, rather than many, why should we change?” Woods asks. “Township government is the one form of government that works.”

However, the truth is, some municipal mergers and consolidations just make sense. “If it’s voluntary and it’s what the people want, then these are the kinds of mergers that PSATS and its members can support,” the Association’s Executive Director R. Keith Hite says.

A year ago, for instance, Rush Township in Centre County took neighboring South Philipsburg Borough under its wing. Supervisor John Shannon says the small borough was running out of money and its infrastructure was in bad shape. The township, on the other hand, is doing well and wanted to help, despite the borough’s financial difficulties.

“Someone asked me, ‘Why would we want to do that?’” Shannon recalls, “and I said, ‘Because it’s the right thing to do. We’re all neighbors; we should be helping each other out.’”

In the end, voters agreed with the merger, which has improved life for the borough’s residents — their taxes have decreased — and has had little financial impact on the township, Shannon says.

“It’s pretty much business as usual,” he says, noting that “people supported the merger because most folks understood it was a common-sense idea. We don’t have big fences up.”
The underlying motive is to take money and authority away from the rich and give it to the poor. The rich in this case are townships and other municipalities that have pinched their pennies and built attractive communities with good schools and low crimes rates. The poor are the cities, many of which are beset with bloated budgets and growing deficits, despite receiving millions of dollars from the state and federal governments.

“The cities need to get their spending under control and figure out why people are leaving,” says Lowman Henry of the Lincoln Institute. “They should be addressing their own problems, not getting others to share their problems.”

Like the others, John Haiko, the Association’s second vice president and chairman of its Executive Board, is troubled by what he’s seeing and hearing from reformists.

“What I’m seeing is a top-down approach that’s intent on telling municipalities how they should be structured and how they should provide services,” he says. “And what I’m hearing are statements like, ‘Let’s look at these things’ and ‘These are only recommendations.’ But my gut feeling is that some time, some place, we’re going to start hearing the word ‘mandate.’”

For the record, PSATS doesn’t oppose regional cooperation or municipal mergers if the efforts are voluntary and locally driven, Executive Director R. Keith Hite says. However, he adds, the Association does take issue with the “bigger-is-better” way of thinking and reform talk that suggests that local officials have flubbed their responsibilities.

“When reformists look across Pennsylvania, they see a glass that’s half empty,” Hite says. “I see a glass that’s half full because I see township officials who have built communities from the ground up. These are places where 5.4 million Pennsylvanians want to live.

“If things are so bad there,” he adds, “why is almost half the state’s population choosing to call our townships home?”

Henry knows the answer to that question: Because people think their local officials are doing a good job. Over the years, the Lincoln Institute has asked hundreds of Pennsylvanians how they feel about federal, state, and local government. The results have become predictable, he says.

“Local government always receives the highest satisfaction rating,” he says. “That’s why there isn’t this hue and cry from Pennsylvanians demanding mergers and consolidations because, for them, local government works.”

Berwood Yost, director of Franklin and Marshall College’s Floyd Center for Opinion Research, uncovered similar findings in 2006 when, on behalf of the Pennsylvania Economy League, he studied Pennsylvanians’ attitudes about local government.

No matter who researchers talked to or where they went, Yost told the Lancaster New Era newspaper, people said much the same thing: that local government is the “cornerstone of democracy,” “helpful,” and “less wasteful than other governments.”

Given the evidence and a public that favors small government, Henry wonders: “How is ‘fragmentation’ hurting us?”
Not surprisingly, calls for local government reform have grown louder since 2003, when the Brookings Institution released Back to Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania, which blamed Pennsylvania’s weak economy and its financially unstable cities on two things: too many local governments and too much sprawl.

In the aftermath, groups such as the State Planning Board and The Campaign to Renew Pennsylvania, an arm of 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, have emerged to carry the Brookings banner and tout the need for more efficient governing.

PSATS Executive Board member Bill Hawk is the lone township voice on the State Planning Board, which in 2006 identified priorities for Pennsylvania’s local governments. These recommendations, with an emphasis on regionalizing services, consolidating municipalities, and sharing taxes, have since formed the foundation of the reformist platform.

Hawk says that while some proposals being tossed about are valid, others appear to be arbitrary, unnecessary, and focused on one thing: forcing municipal mergers. “It’s disconcerting. Why force anyone to merge?” he says, noting that he has had his work cut out for him.

“There are 14 people on the board—and one dissenter. I have been fighting and fighting and fighting.”

Since Brookings, three new reform-based studies have come along, too. Released last spring, the reports were written by three different groups, the Brookings Institution, the Pennsylvania Economy League, and Penn State University, but they paint the same gloomy picture of the commonwealth. The studies claim that rural and suburban communities are facing the same problems that have been plaguing their urban neighbors: increasing crime, decreasing jobs and revenues, and an aging population.
The solution? Pennsylvania’s local governments need to come together and pool their resources for the greater good of the commonwealth and its taxpayers. As researcher Bill Shuffstall of Penn State University sees it, “we are all interdependent and will rise or sink together.”

The problem is, the studies say, antiquated laws are standing in the way of collaboration and consolidation. That’s why the authors of the studies and reformists alike have called on the General Assembly to update such statutes as the Municipal Consolidation or Merger Act of 1994 and the Municipalities Financial Recovery Act of 1987, better known as Act 47.

“To protect the investments that have already been made and to achieve sustainable revitalization, we have to change the rules of the game that no longer work well for our cities — or for any of our municipalities,” Terry Kaufman, a board member of 10,000 Friends, recently told the House Urban Affairs Committee. “The rules of the game are defined by an outmoded system of local governance and taxation that no longer fits with the way we live and do business.”

Rewriting the rules

In fact, legislation is already in the works — some driven by the State Planning Board and some by Renew Pennsylvania — that has the potential to dramatically rewrite the “rules of the game” for local government.

One proposal would open the door for municipalities that regionalize services to create new taxes and share the revenues. This, reformists say, would help municipalities become less reliant on property taxes to fund programs.

“There are many outstanding examples of townships that are working together, but officials want to take it to the next level and offer such critical services as police and fire,” Judith Schwank of 10,000 Friends says. “Often, these are the communities that need these services the most but don’t have the money to buy into joint programs. We want to provide an option that will allow them to create another source of revenue to deliver the services and relieve property taxes.”

Voters weigh in on municipal mergers and consolidations

Since 1990, Pennsylvanians have approved 11 and rejected 16 efforts to merge or consolidate municipalities. Many other efforts have not made it to a vote.

### Approved

- **1991, Elk County** — Voters approved the consolidation of St. Marys Borough and Benzinger Township to form the City of St. Marys.
- **1991, Tioga County** — Voters approved the merger of Elkland Township into Nelson Township.
- **1992, Indiana County** — Voters approved the merger of Jacksonville Borough into Black Lick Township.
- **1994, Erie County** — Voters approved the merger of Fairview Borough into Fairview Township.
- **1997, Cambria County** — Voters approved the consolidation of Barnesboro Borough and Spangler Borough to form Northern Cambria Borough. *(Note: This was previously rejected in 1993.)*
- **1997, Cumberland County** — Voters approved the merger of West Fairview Borough into East Pennsboro Township.
- **1998, Berks County** — Voters approved the merger of Temple Borough into Muhlenberg Township.
- **2001, Berks County** — Voters approved the merger of Wyomissing Hills Borough into Wyomissing Borough.
- **2002, Potter County** — Voters approved the merger of East Fork Township into Wharton Township.
- **2003, Berks County** — Voters approved the merger of West Lawn Borough into Spring Township.
- **2005, Centre County** — Voters approved the merger of South Philipsburg Borough into Rush Township.

### Rejected

- **1991, Monroe County** — Voters rejected the consolidation of East Stroudsburg Borough and Hamilton, Middle Smithfield, Price, Smithfield, and Stroud townships.
- **1991, Cambria County** — Voters rejected the consolidation of Cassandra and Portage boroughs and Portage Township.
- **1993, Cambria County** — Voters rejected the consolidation of Barnesboro and Spangler boroughs. *(Note: This was eventually approved in 1997.)*
- **1993, Butler County** — Voters rejected the merger of Seven Fields Borough into Cranberry Township.
- **1994, Beaver County** — Voters rejected the consolidation of East Rochester and Rochester boroughs and Rochester Township.
- **1995, Centre County** — Voters rejected the consolidation of State College Borough and College and Patton townships.
- **1995 and 2002, Clearfield County** — Voters rejected the consolidation of the City of DuBois and Sandy Township.
- **1995, Schuylkill County** — Voters rejected the consolidation of Tower City Borough and Porter Township.
- **1995, Clinton County** — Voters rejected the merger of South Renovo Borough into Renovo Borough.
- **2001, Susquehanna County** — Voters rejected the consolidation of Susquehanna and Oakland boroughs.
- **2001, Cambria County** — Voters rejected the merger of Cassandra Borough and Portage Township.
- **2004, Cambria County** — Voters rejected the consolidation of Portage Borough and Portage Township.
- **2004, Mercer County** — Voters rejected the consolidation of the cities of Farrell, Hermitage, and Sharon and the boroughs of Sharpsville and Wheatland.
- **2005, Washington County** — Voters rejected the merger of Burgettstown borough into Smith Township.
- **2005, Washington County** — Voters rejected the merger of Coal Center Borough into California Borough.

Information courtesy of PA Futures
Reformists also want the General Assembly to make it more appealing for healthier communities to collaborate and even merge with their less-than-well-off neighbors. Another measure aims to broaden the definition of a distressed community under Act 47. This proposal would bring many smaller communities under its scope and possibly force them to merge with an adjacent municipality.

In addition, reformists are taking cues from other states and studying whether Pennsylvania should establish a boundary review board to oversee and possibly recommend municipal mergers and consolidations. They also want lawmakers to rewrite sections of the Municipal Consolidation or Merger Act to “smooth the way for boundary change,” Schwank says.

“The way the process is now, one municipality could ruin the plan,” she says. “In theory, that makes sense, but it needs to be addressed.”

As it stands, these initiatives are works in progress. However, lawmakers have thrown their support behind a resolution, sponsored by Rep. John Yudichak, that would create a Local Government Study Commission to help municipalities improve services. The measure has passed the House and is before the Senate Local Government Committee. If approved, PSATS would have one representative on the commission.

“’The question the commission will address is, How do we deliver the services residents deserve with the money we have?’” says Yudichak, who represents parts of Luzerne County, where some municipalities simply don’t have the dollars to fight growing problems, including drug trafficking. “They are treading water just to keep the lights on.”

This prompted the lawmaker and the Luzerne County commissioners to form the Municipal Cooperation Commission, a grassroots group that hopes to “empower” residents and officials serving the county’s 72 municipalities. The organization offers a variety of local government services, he says, but helping municipalities overcome the difficulties of forming regional police departments is a priority.

“Public safety,” Yudichak says, “that’s what we’re trying to focus on.”

Elsewhere in Pennsylvania, similar regional and reform-minded efforts are taking shape. Two in particular are being touted on Renew Pennsylvania’s Web site: Renew Lehigh Valley and Metro-York.

The goal of the Lehigh Valley campaign is to transform the region “into a more vibrant, economically growing community with strong cities and boroughs that retains its young people while preserving open space.” Meanwhile, Metro-York is focused on improving education, regionalizing police and planning, sharing taxes, and “modernizing” local government.

Although some York County officials have raised concerns about the effort and its direction, Bill Schenck, a supervisor for Springettsbury Township who served on Metro-York’s Municipal Workgroup, says they don’t have anything to worry about.

“Early on, people were concerned about the ramifications,” he says, “but it was clear [in the workgroup] that if the subject of consolidation came up, the project would die because it wouldn’t have any traction.

“We all agreed that municipal government would remain but that we would look for ways to work together better.”

This makes perfect sense to Schenck, who believes that the county’s local governments have to be focused on the future, including what happens to the City of York.

“York is one check away from bankruptcy,” he says. “The goal for us now is figuring out how to strengthen the city while still keeping our identity.”

Eric Menzer, co-chair of Metro-York’s Leadership Committee and chairman of the board for 10,000 Friends, understands that change can be alarming.

Local government reformists may believe that Pennsylvania’s local governments need to do more cooperating, but if you look around the commonwealth, you can find hundreds of examples of townships working with their neighbors. These efforts are saving thousands in tax dollars. Often it takes is a good cup of coffee and a handshake to get these projects rolling.
especially since the group recently put forth some aggressive recommendations.

“We don’t have any ulterior motives, and none of this is an attempt to replace the local government system in York County,” Menzer says, “but we need to make some changes. We need to move beyond the rhetoric that this is a bail-out of the city and look at this as being in everyone’s best interest.”

Where’s the problem?

Of course, when reformists talk about regionalizing services and merging municipalities, they are quick to point out that this will eliminate inefficiencies and save tax dollars. To the uninitiated, this theory may certainly seem logical, but at least one expert says this thinking is flawed.

Wendell Cox has trotted the globe to study government and maintains that the bigger the operation, the bigger its budget. He also says that the decision to regionalize services and government should stem from the will of the people, not from the will of special interests.

“Anytime you increase the size of government, you increase the cost of services,” Cox says.

In 2005, the consolidation expert and PSATS released the study, Growth, Economic Development, and Local Government Structure in Pennsylvania, which was a response to the original Brookings report. The study found that Pennsylvania’s local governments aren’t at the root of its problems.

Today, Cox continues to stand by these findings, saying that Pennsylvania is much better off with its decentralized system of small municipalities, where officials are in tune with the needs and desires of their constituents.

“Township government is run more like a family,” he says. “Officials don’t assume that everyone is waiting around for the next tax increase.”

In fact, all across the commonwealth, townships have been voluntarily helping each other and participating in councils of governments to save tax dollars on projects and purchases of all shapes and sizes. Many times, all it takes is a handshake and the work gets done. Also, since the passage of meaningful reforms to the Municipalities Planning Code several years ago, more
than 700 municipalities have developed joint comprehensive plans and other land use policies and practices.

“It’s not easy out there, especially with fuel prices the way they are,” says PSATS Executive Board member Shirl Barnhart, a supervisor for Morgan Township in Greene County. “Although it’s a struggle sometimes, townships aren’t about raising taxes or cutting services. We’re about being innovative.”

That spirit of innovation and cooperation is alive and well in rural Potter County, where Abbott Township secretary Rachel Pagano says that “neighboring townships should without a doubt help each other, especially in rural areas where product and service choices are limited.

“We all live together, use the same roads, shop at the same stores and businesses,” she says. “I can’t imagine not working with our neighbors.”

“We’re looking any place we can to do more for less,” says Dick Brandes, a supervisor for Jefferson Township in Mercer County and president of the Mercer County Association of Township Officials. “We raised taxes five years ago, and it was the first time we did it in 20 years.”

All of this, Cox says, is proof that Pennsylvania is in much better shape than the reformists would have the public believe. In fact, his research indicates that, to the contrary, Pennsylvania is not headed for disaster.

While it’s true that many of its cities are losing population, other regions of Pennsylvania, including those along the Maryland and New York borders, are overflowing with new residents, Cox says. Compared to neighboring states, the commonwealth’s housing prices and taxes are much more affordable, too.

“When I look at Pennsylvania, I see an oasis of affordability in a region of unaffordability,” Cox says. “It’s the most affordable state in the East.”

His conclusion: Pennsylvania is doing just fine and should think twice before radically restructuring the way it governs.

“Much of this is coming from a bunch of academics and organizations that have a regional agenda that would create serious problems,” Cox says. “They want to change for change’s sake, but they should leave the control in the hands of township supervisors who were elected by the people.”

The Lincoln Institute’s Lowman Henry agrees: “If it’s been done this way for 200 years, it’s been done this way for a reason.”

Across the United States, groups, many with ties to business, are encouraging municipal mergers and consolidations. In Indiana, for instance, the state’s chamber of commerce is behind the effort to eliminate townships there. “They talk about making local government more efficient, but no one has been able to prove that we’re the problem,” says Debbie Driskell, executive director of the Indiana Township Association.

A cautionary tale

The truth is, however, that in this day and age when reformists have the sympathetic ear of lawmakers and others in powerful positions, nothing is guaranteed, not even township government. Just ask Debbie Driskell, executive director of the Indiana Township Association.

In recent years, she says, the Indiana Chamber of Commerce has been pushing the legislature to ease the tax burden by streamlining government in the Hoosier state. The Indianapolis mayor’s office is also behind Indianapolis Works, an aggressive plan to revitalize the city and surrounding Marion County by merging police and fire departments and eliminating local government.

“We’ve seen a variety of bills introduced that would do everything from eliminate our duties to eliminate us altogether,” Driskell says. “They talk about making local government more efficient, but no one has been able to prove that we’re the problem.”

Driskell believes that “big business” is behind the local government reform movement in Indiana and elsewhere in the United States.

“Without us, it makes it easier for them to get their way,” she says. “We used to have authority over roads and bridges and schools and libraries, but our opponents keep picking away at our duties. Pretty soon, there isn’t going to be anything left.”

Could this happen in Pennsylvania? Lumber Township’s Von Hause believes so.

“As township officials, we have to be aware of what’s going on,” he says. “We could lose local government — it’s something Harrisburg wants to do. But we have to fight the good fight. We have to fight to keep local government.”