

Forum sponsored by R.I. League of Cities and Towns promotes consolidating municipal services

February 5, 2009

By Lynn Arditi

Journal Staff Writer

Providence Journal

WARWICK — Rhode Island has 39 cities and towns, but should it also have 39 snowplowing contracts?

That's a question that communities should begin to ask as declining revenues force them to slash municipal and school budgets, said a group of panelists yesterday at a forum hosted by the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns.

The concept of streamlining services sounds like a no-brainer. Corporations have done this for years through mergers and consolidations. Yet, the term consolidation often gets a cold shoulder from communities that fear any regionalization means losing their local identity.

Yesterday, the panelists tried to reassure a room full of city and town managers from around the nation's smallest state that there is less to fear — and a lot to save — with “shared services.”

The panelists — the town managers of North Kingstown and East Greenwich and the executive director of a regional government organization in Hartford, Conn. — drew on their experiences to talk about the potential and pitfalls of savings through sharing.

“Three hundred and forty fire districts and a pumper truck cost \$40 million. You do the math!” said Lyle D. Wray, executive director of the Capitol Region Council of Governments, in Hartford. “I come from the Midwest, where we have two.”

The regional council comprises the City of Hartford and 29 surrounding communities with a combined population of 800,000, he said, which share services such as bidding for job contracts. Membership is voluntary, so communities can withdraw if they don't find it in their best interest, he said.

The savings are partly due to size. Communities that are very small tend to be costly to run, Wray said, but a community that gets too big also is costly. The savings, he said, is someplace in the middle. “The question is: How do you get to that sweet spot?”

The first challenge, the panelists said, is to get city and town officials to even talk about sharing services. Talk about merging school districts or police departments and you're bound to get stiff opposition, the panelists said. But other “back office” functions are more politically palatable.

Services such as purchasing, wastewater management and snowplowing all can be shared to save money. Some towns, such as East Greenwich, already have tried it. East Greenwich now has one contractor providing landscaping and snowplowing services for the town and the schools, said East Greenwich Town Manager William Sequino.

The harder sell, the panelists said, is the notion of cutting costs by merging services such as police, fire or schools. And there is also the issue of getting labor unions on board, which none of the panelists addressed.

During the question and answer period a man in the audience, who said he was the town planner in Hopkinton, suggested that towns save money by joining together to hire a consultant for their comprehensive plans, which have to be updated every five years.

Sequino said that the “big money” to be saved is in the school budget, which in his town represents about 70 percent of the budget.

A librarian from Cumberland said that libraries around the state already share catalogs and other records. “How far can you go?” she asked.

Sequino responded, “Does every town need a library? ... That’s one of those identity issues that people don’t want to hear about.”

For that matter, he said, “Do we need a tax assessor in every city and town?”

larditi@projo.com