



## **For dollars & sense, Valley's fiefdoms must learn to share**

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For far too long, the Mahoning Valley's 17 cities, 23 villages, 56 townships and 40 public school districts have collectively created fractured fiefdoms of inefficient operations and inflated spending of taxpayer dollars.

For almost as long, calls for mergers, consolidations and sharing of services among this parochial patchwork have been met with strident resistance. It's past time now to ax the fat and produce efficient economies of scale

As a recent report from Ohio's metropolitan chambers of commerce including The Regional Chamber of Youngstown and Warren illustrates, the state can ill afford a 19th-century model of government structure in the 21st century. The report, titled "Beyond Boundaries: A Shared Services Plan for Ohio Schools and Government" offers school and community leaders in the Mahoning Valley a roadmap to navigate toward sharing services and cutting wasteful and duplicative spending.

Like it or not, local leaders must realize the common perception among taxpayers that government spending at all levels has torpedoed out of control. Data from the chambers' report that show local government spending in Ohio increasing from \$47 billion in 1993 to \$107 billion in 2009 (far outpacing the rate of inflation and the state's paltry population growth) add credence to those perceptions. So, too, does the increasingly high level of voter rejection of tax levies for local governments and public schools.

### Growing importance

No longer can intergovernmental cooperation and sharing of services be regarded as one possibility to cut costs; it's now an imperative. Toward that end, it is encouraging to see movement in several Mahoning Valley communities and school districts:

In Trumbull County, Liberty Township has become part of the county's 911 dispatch, and Hubbard and Newton Falls are considering using the county 911 system.

In Mahoning County, Youngstown and county leaders recently signed a contract to have the latter handle the city's building inspections. The two governments also are leaning toward consolidating building departments.

Throughout the Valley, the metropolitan chambers report Trumbull County has 878 individual examples of shared-service projects, Mahoning County has 558, and Columbiana County has 412.

Such momentum should serve as a springboard for greater and more structural cost-saving consolidations. Foremost among them is a dusted-off proposal from The Regional Chamber for Ohio school districts to consolidate district administrative functions into central administrative units for each county.

As the chamber aptly points out, public school student population in Mahoning, Trumbull and Columbiana counties has dropped by more than 48,000 students in the last 30 years, but the costs of education and administration continue to go up and the number of schools remain about the same. Administrative costs in the three counties average \$1,462 per student compared with a state like Virginia with county administration that spends only \$860 per student for administration.

It works at many levels

Such potential for taxpayer relief and enhanced delivery of services makes this and other service-sharing proposals a strong elixir for public-sector inefficiency. At the local level, communities and school districts should embrace them. At the state level, legislators should move quickly to remove roadblocks to their achievement.

Ohio residents want such restructuring. A recent statewide poll from the Center for Government Research shows about 80 percent of Ohioans support sharing services among local governments and school districts. All that is lacking in many circles is the will among keepers of the status quo to seize the opportunities for productive and cost-saving change.