



Merger of health departments could attract funds from state

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If they haven't already, members of the General Health District Advisory Council that represents Mahoning County townships should seek a meeting with Randy Cole, president of the State Controlling Board.

Cole not only has unique insights into the state's biennium budget — with emphasis on how much money local public entities actually receive from Columbus — but he can provide the council with the reasons for merging the county and Youngstown health departments.

Indeed, if asked about it, Cole can share details about a special program created by the Kasich administration that rewards innovation, consolidation and cooperation by local governments. The biennium budget has about \$40 million earmarked for the program.

That fund should provide the incentive for the merger of the Mahoning County and Youngstown health departments.

Youngstown Mayor Charles Sammarone has long advocated folding the city health agency into the Mahoning County Health District. Sammarone points to Summit County where the city of Akron's health agency was dissolved. The county health district provides services in the city, and from all accounts there haven't been any disruptions.

The Mahoning County advisory council, which is the governing body of the district board of health, is to meet next month to vote on the merger.

"After that clear confirmation of the general health district's commitment to the process is made, we can move on to the additional steps necessary to achieve full consolidation into a single health district," Youngstown Law Director Anthony Farris said in a letter to county health Commissioner Patricia Sweeney.

In June, Sweeney got the mayor all riled up when she seemed to shelve the idea of consolidation by proposing that the city contract with the county for the provision of health services.

Not surprisingly, Mayor Sammarone reacted with all the frustration of a rejected suitor. He made it clear that his ultimate goal is to get Youngstown out of the health-services business.

Sweeney's letter also prompted us to editorially castigate county health officials for not recognizing that the status quo in government is no longer sustainable.

We were particularly critical of Sweeney's contention that Youngstown's contracting with the county "may be far less stressful and perhaps more efficient when current needs exist."

"Less stressful for whom?" we asked in the editorial. "The feelings of public employees must be secondary to what's in the best interest of the taxpayers. That means making the most efficient use of public agencies and eliminating duplication of services to save money."

Clarification meeting

That said, we now praise Sweeney for subsequently meeting with the mayor and Erin Bishop, acting city health commissioner, to clarify her letter of June.

She stressed that it was not intended to convey the idea that the county was only interested in Youngstown contracting for services.

She explained that the contract is a step toward unification of the health agencies

Sweeney insisted that the county board of health and its advisory council have never said they don't want one health department for the entire county.

"Let's take it to the next level," is the position taken by the county, according to the county health commissioner.

Well, the decision by the General Health District Advisory Council will speak volumes and clearly show how sincere county officials are about consolidation of health services.

We urge them to think expansively.