

REPORT ON PUBLIC FORUM

Background

On Wednesday evening, October 8, 2008, the Joint Consolidation Study Commission of Wantage Township and Sussex Borough met to hear public comments on two topics:

1. Elements of consolidation that may cause concern or apprehension among residents of the two communities.
2. Critical issues that need to be addressed if the study is to be considered valid and complete.

Approximately 60 persons attended the meeting at High Point Regional High School. Speakers were asked to address the two topics above, and to state whether the priorities and categories suggested by the commission at its September 3 meeting reflected the communities' views.

With a few exceptions, all comments concerned themselves with at least one of the issues identified by the commission at its September 3 meeting. In addition, there was no strong sentiment from the public for changing any of the priorities set by the commission at that meeting.

Exceptions

These issues were mentioned or alluded to by members of the public, but was not included in the issues identified previously by the commission:

1. **Addressing issues related to growth, especially in Wantage.**
2. **Providing the public with two or three alternative views of the future shape of the communities.**

PUBLIC COMMENTS FROM THE OCTOBER 8 FORUM

The following section consists of two elements:

- Public comments as recorded October 8 during the meeting by commission secretary Lee Abbott.
 - **Notes on those comments** by Reagan Burkholder, after analysis of their relationship to the Preliminary Report of September 8, 2008.
- 1 Act as leaders, not town criers – look to the future; base decisions on the long view (50 yrs)
RB: Procedural
 - 2 Reassessments – risk of values being higher than market values; buying and selling homes
RB: Covered under Very critical
 - 3 Combining services to save money (road departments, fire departments, police—in future)
RB: Covered under Very critical
 - 4 Transition – if consolidation is the decision, there has to be a vision of where we want to go -- what would a perfect world look like, providing two or three alternative views of the commission's "perfect world." **RB: Partially covered under Very critical and Critical; commission should decide if it wants to forecast multiple versions of a "perfect world"**
 - 5 Patience – don't know the answer yet; regardless the county will be supportive **RB: Procedural**
 - 6 Possible form of government – choose the most representative form (voters' choice) – equal representation **RB: Covered under Very critical and C&A: Very important and Important**
 - 7 Sussex water supply – will more people strain the system **RB: Covered under Extremely important and Very critical**
 - 8 Public referendum – public hearings – and / or open forum **RB: Procedural**
 - 9 Re-evaluations – differences between the two municipalities **RB: Covered under Very critical**

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- 10 Sussex Borough water / sewer debt – state assistance **RB: Covered under Very critical**
- 11 If neither municipality wanted to put up money, why do it? - reduction in state aid, looking for savings (consolidation or shared services) **RB: Procedural**
- 12 Tax bill cost of police department? **RB: Covered under Very important**
- 13 Concern about larger government, leadership and corruption **RB: Related to the Growth issue**
- 14 New growth will strain services (water, school) **RB: Related to the Growth issue**
- 15 Learn from other communities that have consolidated **RB: Procedural**
- 16 Differences in properties in the two communities and looking at school taxes, reduction / increases between the two. **RB: Covered under Very critical**
- 17 Different tax rates between properties in the two municipalities **RB: Covered under Very critical**
- 18 Would a police department be mandatory if they consolidate (up to the governing bodies) **RB: Answered at the forum; not mandatory**
- 19 If the representation of a consolidated municipality is just by population; Sussex loses out **RB: Covered under Very critical and C&A: Very important**
- 20 What was the result of the 1973 study – recommended consolidation (copy on the Wantage website) **RB: Procedural**
- 21 Set up a water district and a sewer district **RB: Covered under C&A: Extremely important, Very critical and Critical**
- 22 Wisdom from Trenton **RB: Procedural**
- 23 Everybody knows everybody – not an urban area, yet; managing growth **RB: Related to the Growth issue**
- 24 This is just a study – decision is up to the voters; governing bodies thought it should be studied **RB: Procedural**
- 25 Local job opportunities **RB: Related to the Growth issue**
- 26 Sussex has Guardian Angels patrols **RB: presumably related to police issue, covered under Very important**

FROM THE PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE COMMISSION'S SEPTEMBER 3 MEETING

The following section reports the commission's decisions at its September 3 meeting, for reference and convenience.

PART 1: CONCERNS & APPREHENSIONS

Extremely important

- Various issues related to the Sussex utility system. These include:
 - Capacity
 - Financial condition
 - Physical condition
 - Potential for connections within Wantage
 - Concern about mandatory connections
 - Concern about overburdening system
 - Form for management & decision making

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Very important

- Financial issues: costs, savings, effect on taxes, relative debt
- Police services, and the options available
- Issues related to the current autonomy and identity of the two communities

Important

- Form of government
- Sussex residents' ability to have representation on the new governing body
- Status of low-income housing and state Council on Affordable Housing requirements

Other issues discussed

- True cost, without state tax assistance
- Potential loss of municipal employment
- Status of the volunteer fire and EMS agencies
- Differential in public works services between the two communities
- The name(s) of the communities
- How municipal services will be organized & structured
- Potential effect on state school aid
- Potential impact on residential sale price when state tax aid is lost
- Status of existing shared services between the communities
- Impact of future growth in Wantage
- Impact on school taxes
- Fear of Sussex becoming an insignificant part of a larger community
- Image of the communities
- Fear of change
- Different perceptions among residents, based on age and length of residency

PART 2: CRITICAL ISSUES

This discussion centered on issues that the commission needs to address in detail because failure to address them would threaten the success of the study.

Extremely critical

- Developing a complete financial picture of the two communities, including a forecast of finances three to five years into the future. This includes considering the need for — and potential impact of — property revaluation or reassessment for tax purposes.

Very critical

- Complete evaluation of the Sussex utility system, including all elements listed under **Concerns & apprehensions**, above
- Maintaining effective communications within the two communities throughout the study
- Form of government

Critical

- Analysis of the two communities' master plans and any potential need for harmonization

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- Development of a complete transition plan, including services to be provided and staffing levels
- Maintenance of identities of the two communities

Other issues discussed

- Potential impact if existing shared-service agreements were not renewed when the contracts expire

Respectfully submitted,

Government Management Advisors, LLC



Consultant & discussion moderator

October 14, 2008