

**MINUTES OF THE JOINT CONSOLIDATION STUDY COMMISSION  
OF WANTAGE TOWNSHIP AND SUSSEX BOROUGH,  
SPECIAL MEETING  
HELD AT THE SUSSEX BOROUGH HALL ON JANUARY 21, 2009**

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Commission Chairman Earl Snook called the meeting to order at 7:03 PM, and requested Secretary Lee Abbott to call the roll. Upon roll call, the following members of the Commission were present:

E. Snook, S. Hosking, C. McKay, E. Meyer, A. Jacobs, A. Little and W. Dunn. Ms. Flynn arrived at 7:10 and Mr. Lagattuta arrived at 8:30.

Also present: G. Fehrenbach, consultant and J. Doyle, NJDCA liaison.

G. Kresge was not present.

Mr. Snook led the assembly in the Salute to the Flag.

Mr. Snook stated, "This meeting is being held in compliance with the provisions of the Open Public Meetings Act, Public Laws 1975, Chapter 231. It has been properly noticed and posted to the public, and certified by the Secretary."

#### **FISCAL ASPECTS OF CONSOLIDATION**

Copies of Mr. Gettler's analysis of the *Fiscal Aspects of Consolidation* report were distributed to all commissioners shortly after the January 7 meeting. Mr. Snook called on Mr. Gettler to present a summary of his review, asking that he keep his remarks to 15 minutes. Mr. Gettler declined to make his points within that time frame.

Mr. Snook asked if Mr. Doyle had any comments on Mr. Gettler's analysis. Mr. Doyle explained that the report was based on information from knowledgeable individuals, budgets, annual financial statements and additional background information. For the Borough, the report was based on the budget he received as amended in September 2008. Subsequently, changes were made to the Borough's budget. The *Fiscal Aspects of Consolidation* report is being amended to reflect material changes.

#### **SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS**

Administration - Two documents were distributed at the meeting: a written report, *The Administration Committee's Findings on Possible Benefits to Consolidation of the Borough of Sussex and the Township of Wantage*, and a set of organizational charts that reflect possible changes. Mr. McKay described their review and analysis, and he commended Ms. Hosking for her contributions. The Committee based its suggestions on the Wantage paradigm, because it more closely approximates the population and area of a consolidated community. The report identified potential changes and savings of consolidation, but all final decisions would rest with the new government. The report refers to job titles and salaries, and does not include employee

names. The suggestions involve reductions in staff positions, and not the termination of any specific person. Setting up the actual organizational structure and deciding who would fill the positions would be the responsibility of the new government. In the report, “new town” is used to designate the consolidated community. Savings are conservatively estimated.

The estimated proposed savings:	Health benefits	\$186,840
	DPW Salaries	100,166
	Administrator / office salaries	113,144
	Council salaries / benefits	<u>100</u>
	Total annual savings	\$400,250 per year

Mr. McKay noted the following: The reductions are based on the lower of the two salaries when a position is eliminated. No change was calculated for positions not eliminated, even though the pay scales are not identical in the two municipalities. Sussex hires seasonal employees at \$12 / hr, and these were not included in the analysis. One municipality has higher overhead, which would be an issue. He noted that these represent possible savings. He added a personal comment regarding farmland assessments, which could be a significant issue.

The following comments were offered:

- The farmland assessment issue is outside the Commission’s purview. The state defines the farmland assessment, and all that meet the criteria can benefit from it. Farmland assessments must be checked annually, which is an additional burden on the tax assessor. Mr. Jacobs noted that without the farmland assessment there might be more development, more houses built and more children in school – typically, one house doesn’t generate enough taxes to cover the education costs. Mr. Snook stated that many larger farms are under farmland preservation.
- The \$400,000 savings is out of \$3.3 million in taxes between the two communities.
- The construction department in Wantage has been approximately 70% self-supporting until the recent change in the economic climate.

Mr. McKay and Ms. Hosking were commended for their work. The report was not approved by the Commission, but it was turned over to the consultants to be aligned with the *Profile of a Consolidated Town*.

The *Profile of a Consolidated Town* is closely related to the Administration Subcommittee report. The Commissioners had no additional questions regarding this report. Mr. Fehrenbach noted that the Sussex Public Works employees have 25% of their salaries charged to Utilities. Some sort of contract would be needed between the new town and the utility.

The discrepancy between the numbers of public works employees in the Administration Subcommittee’s and the consultants’ reports is not a true difference but rather different ways of counting the same information. Some employees cross functions and are counted under other positions, and Sussex’s 25% charge to the utilities was counted differently.

Finance - nothing to report at this time.

Planning / Zoning - currently, the two municipalities are developing two master plans. If there is one consolidated community, there will be one master plan. Wantage's Town Center project is underway; if the communities consolidate, Sussex could be the town center. Also, the economic downturn is impacting COAH.

Public Safety - will be meeting with the fire departments and rescue squads prior to the February Commission meeting.

Public Works and Water / Sewer Utilities - Mr. Little questioned how much reservoir use can be expanded. Currently, the Borough's focus is on sewer I&I savings. Mr. Meyer reported that there is a potential of 50,000 gallons / day from the elimination of manhole cover leakage. Mr. Meyer will provide copies of the Borough minutes referring to I&I and reservoir issues. These are beyond the scope of this Commission.

Public Relations - nothing at this time.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINAL REPORT PREPARATION**

Mr. Snook and Mr. Lagattuta stressed that the final report should be short enough so that people will read it, perhaps just a three page executive summary with the detail included in addendums. Work on the report should begin in mid-February to allow time to rework it before mid-April. Examples of other reports can be reviewed to help envision what the report will look like. The commissioners previously received copies of the Franklin / Hardyston report and the prior Sussex / Wantage report. The Table of Contents from the East Windsor / Hightstown and Princeton studies were provided as examples, along with a recommended Table of Contents for this report. Mr. Doherty prepared a document with the elements required by statute and options for each element. In the end, the Commission, not the consultants or the state, must write its own report. Consensus was that including the advantages and disadvantages of consolidation at the beginning of the report (as in the East Windsor / Hightstown study) would be helpful. Each subcommittee should draft a section. Mr. Snook indicated that he and Mr. Lagattuta will work on the summary towards the end of the writing process. A brief history should be included.

Mr. Doyle noted that state aid is available for the transition costs, but it is up to the Commission to determine what is included and requested.

Mr. Fehrenbach reviewed the concerns raised at the October public meeting: utilities, financial issues, police and COAH have all been addressed. The "softer" issues of autonomy and identity, form of government, representation, and name must be addressed.

The issue of naming the town was discussed. Suggestions included

- Using the "Sussex / Wantage" combination - already used commonly (for example, the school district).
- Not naming the town as some people may feel like they are voting for or against the name, not for or against consolidation.
- Getting suggestions of possible names from the public, perhaps via the newspapers.

Commissioners should review the information and agendas recently distributed in preparation for the next meeting. It is hoped that an outline for the report can be ratified at the meeting.

### **COMMENTS OF THE COMMISSIONERS**

The other commissioners expressed appreciation for the work of the Administration Subcommittee.

### **OPEN PUBLIC SESSION**

Ms. Hosking moved to open the session to the public; Mr. McKay seconded the motion, and it carried unanimously.

Jim Doherty, Wantage resident and Township Administrator, addressed the issue of the farmland assessment; it is a matter of meeting the state-mandated requirements.

He suggested that commissioners should not base decisions on how people may vote; they should follow their consciences. He recommended selecting a name.

He praised the Administration Subcommittee report. He stated that reduction in staffing does not always lead to a reduction in taxes; for example, more tax assessors / collectors may result in a better collection rate. Long-term employees provide experience, and new employees may not be as cost effective. He suggested a transition subcommittee. Also, stake holders could be asked for input--their "wish lists."

Tom Davis, Wantage Township resident, questioned if planning will have to be redone when the new census is completed. He stated that Wantage has been averaging about 60 new homes per year, and Sussex has been losing population. He reinforced the concept of Sussex Borough as the new town center; this would be an opportunity for economic development, revitalization, identity, and perhaps historic preservation. Competition for rateables would not be an issue in a consolidated community. He asked if the issue of a police force had been addressed. Mr. Snook noted that the approved final report is on both municipalities' websites and at the library.

Ann Smulewicz, Wantage resident, congratulated Mr. McKay and Ms. Hosking on their report. She noted that the deciding issue for most people will be the bottom line. She was disappointed that Mr. Gettler's concerns had not been considered and evaluated. Mr. Dunn stated that all the commissioners received and studied Mr. Gettler's report. Mr. Snook reiterated his willingness to listen to a summary of his concerns, provided that it didn't take up too much meeting time. Mr. Jacobs suggested that Mr. Gettler may have been unprepared to present such a brief summary. Mr. Snook responded that Mr. Gettler could contact him with an estimate of the time needed to summarize his report.

Bill Gettler, Wantage resident, stated his belief that Commission should reject the *Fiscal Aspects of Consolidation* report. He presented a written OPRA request. Mr. Snook read the request for every item of correspondence sent or received by any member of the Commission and / or its

secretary relating to the *Fiscal Aspects of Consolidation* report or to Mr. Gettler between December 1, 2008 and January 22, 2009. Mr. Snook directed the secretary to comply with the OPRA request. Since the Commission has not addressed the issue of OPRA requests, there will be no charge for this response, and the issue will be discussed at the next meeting. Mr. Snook stated that copies of the reports accepted as final by the Commission would be included in the OPRA response.

There being no one else present wishing to address the commission, it was moved by Ms. Flynn, seconded by Mr. Little and unanimously carried that the public session be closed.

#### **COMMENTS OF THE COMMISSIONERS**

With no other items for consideration, it was moved by Ms. Hosking, seconded by Mr. Dunn and unanimously carried to adjourn the meeting.

Mr. Snook declared this meeting to be adjourned at 9:30 PM.

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Lee Abbott, Secretary