

Local N.J. governments could lose aid if they do not accept shared public services



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Municipal and county governments that failed to respond to state-recommended shared public services within 14 months would lose state aid in the amount equal to what they would have saved had they shared the service under legislation introduced Thursday by Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney.

If the voters in one town approved the shared service, but those in the other town involved turn the proposal down, only the town that denied it would lose aid.

Sweeney said his proposal is designed to result in taxpayer savings through the elimination of government redundancies, while creating concrete fiscal consequences for local government entities that refuse to enter into sharing agreements that could help their property taxpayers.

"The taxpayers of New Jersey simply can't handle their property tax burden anymore," Sweeney said. "Residents demand greater government efficiency and greater savings. It is well past time we stop just talking and really do something to

provide the incentives needed to get us moving in the right direction on shared services. Simply put, if a town can save money through sharing services and decides not to do so, they are going to lose out on state aid. If you do not want more cost-effective government, than the taxpayers of New Jersey should not be footing the bill."

The legislation would require the state Local Unit Alignment, Reorganization, and Consolidation Commission to study municipal and county governments and school districts to determine where taxpayer dollars could be saved through sharing of services.

If a study showed that a savings could be realized through sharing that service in one or more local governments, the question of whether to do so or not would be put to a public referendum in the municipalities involved.

"Shared services shouldn't just be relegated to talk between towns, but must also take place among counties and school districts," Assemblywoman Pamela R. Lampitt (D-Camden), who will sponsor the bill in the lower house, said. "Residents hear every day about how their communities could share with another and may simply assume officials are making the right choices to put those ideas into action. This plan will ensure that taxpayer expectations are actually met."

There are presently over 600 shared public services involving local governments and school districts in New Jersey.

Sweeney's effort to increase the number is the third in a series of proposals the senator has made during the past two months in an effort to reduce government spending.

In January, Sweeney introduced legislation to reform the state's broken pension system and last month he unveiled legislation to reform public employee health benefits. He believes the three proposals would result in hundreds of millions of dollars in savings to New Jersey taxpayers, allow local officials to rein in property taxes, and implement measures that are fair to lower and middle income workers.

"Given today's economic climate it is imperative that local governments take advantage of every means possible to save taxpayer dollars while ensuring the efficient delivery of essential services" Sweeney said. "For years we have heard talk about the need to share services, but rarely did we see any action. We tried the carrot a few years ago when we offered state aid for sharing services, but it didn't work. More direct action is needed, and this legislation addresses that need."

Under the bill, civil service rules would be suspended for employees impacted by any shared services that are implemented. Sweeney said this would address a concern raised by local government leaders that civil service rules serve as a barrier to sharing services. In putting together the legislation, Sweeney said he met with numerous local elected officials who provided valuable input on the issue of shared services.

"This plan is made stronger in that it directly addresses the antiquated civil service rules that have not only proven overly burdensome and costly, but have been stumbling blocks to sharing agreements in the past," Somerset County Republican Freeholder Peter Palmer, immediate past president of the New Jersey Association of Counties, said. "There is no doubt that sharing services makes government more efficient and cost-effective."

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"We share with Senate President Sweeney the commitment to provide meaningful, lasting relief to New Jersey's property taxpayers," Buena Vista Mayor Chuck Chiarello, president of the League of Municipalities, said. "By removing many of the roadblocks that increase the costs of shared services – things like terminal leave pay, civil service mandates, employee tenure requirements – provisions in Senate President Sweeney's bill will begin to make that happen."

– TOM HESTER SR., NEWJERSEYNEWSROOM.COM

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What he/she said.

2. Sunday, 13 March 2011 07:46

(Yep!)

Agreed. Near as I can tell from what I've read there's some excessive public service going on in that area (read: bureaucracy) that could stand to be trimmed. Good post!

Cutting down on bureaucracy

1. Sunday, 13 March 2011 06:24

(ChrisC77)

I like it. Let's do what we can to cut down on layers of bureaucracy. Policies like this and that cable/phone service deregulation bill are exactly what we need to modernize the state. This bill will give all of us taxpayers more money in our pockets, and the telecom deregulation measure would bring in more competition, giving us lower prices and better service. Things like these are what we need right now

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