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PRINCETON: State poll: Less support for consolidation

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By Philip Sean Curran, Staff Writer

Mayor Liz Lempert likes to hold up the merger of the two Princetons as a model for the state, but a growing number of residents think the idea does not make sense for them.

A Rutgers-Eagleton poll released this week found that by 46 to 45 percent, state residents oppose merging their town with a neighboring municipality. The poll of 816 residents was done between March 31 and April 6 and has a margin of error of around 4 percent.

The finding showed that opposition to mergers grew by 8 percentage points since a 2010 Rutgers-Eagleton poll on the same issue.

"This decline in support may be partially a result of the smaller property tax increases seen over the last few years," said David Redlawsk, the poll director and Rutgers political science professor.

Up and down the state, consolidation is not winning converts but rather losing them. Resistance is strong in Democrat strongholds of Hudson and Essex counties, while about half of South Jersey residents favor keeping things the way they are, the poll found.

"The results are pretty much what one would expect. Citizens are naturally suspicious about 'change' and presently there is a lot of concern and lack of trust about government, in general," said Anton Lahnston, the past chairman of Princeton's Consolidation Study Commission that recommend the merger a couple of years ago.

"Knowing that there is resistance to change — what I am interested in is the work that needs to be done in those communities in which there are citizens who are seriously discussing consolidation and shared services," he said.

South Orange Trustee Howard Levison, a member of that Essex County municipality's governing body, said that his community eight years ago looked at doing a consolidation report with its sister town of Maplewood. Voters in the two communities were split on the issue. South Orange was in favor, Maplewood was not.

"Consolidation is hard. That's a political issue," he said. "But I think there are great opportunities in shared services, which builds a trust relationship between the two municipalities that it might build towards a fait accompli that they'll come together."

The two Princetons became one in 2013, hailed as a consolidation that would make the community a lighthouse to the rest of New Jersey. Since then, officials have said the merger has succeeded.

The municipal portion of the tax bill has gone down, even as the town increased services.

"Even the recent merger of the Princetons resulted in just a 5-percent initial savings, while it is too early to tell if the combination will keep tax increases under control," Mr. Redlawsk said.

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