

Poll finds New Jerseyans support consolidating municipalities as a way to cut costs

By Amy Ellis Nutt/The Star-Ledger

April 20, 2010, 6:27PM

Fifty-four percent of New Jerseyans favor consolidating their local municipalities, according to a **new Rutgers-Eagleton Poll released today**. The primary reason? An even larger majority of those in favor (62 percent) believe consolidation would increase the efficiency of their local government.

"While there's a hyper-local focus in New Jersey, the world has changed and we're connected in ways we've never been before," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll and a professor of political science at Rutgers University. "People don't stay in one place as long as they used to; they don't develop roots. But the biggest driver is the possibility that (consolidation) will cut costs."

Still, Redlawsk was surprised by the results; home rule has always been the mantra for most New Jerseyans.

Strongest support for the idea (66 percent) came from those living in South Jersey, near Philadelphia, and in New Jersey's more rural northwestern towns (67 percent). Opposition to local government mergers was highest in the suburbs, with 46 percent saying they were not in favor of a change.

"There is some history that New Jerseyans have supported consolidation in the abstract in the past, but it's always been voted down," Redlawsk said.

Ingrid Reed, a policy analyst at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers and director of its New Jersey Project, said the last time a major merger took place in the state was more than a half-century ago, when her hometown, Vineland Borough, and Landis Township combined to form the city of Vineland in Cumberland County.

"Part of the problem is there's not a lot of information available about how local government mergers have managed," said Reed, who did not participate in the Rutgers-Eagleton poll. "Convincing people you can do something better depends on experimenting."

Redlawsk and Reed also cite recent polls that show strong support for cuts in state funding of local governments, and an easing of restrictions on firing municipal workers, as evidence of a sea-change in attitudes toward consolidation, especially as a way of dealing with the soaring state debt.

"People are realizing cost issues are related to how we organize ourselves," Reed said. "What appears to be happening is an opening of the minds of New Jersey voters that maybe the way we organize local government is not efficient or cost-effective."

State residents may be willing to see the light on greater centralization of government, but they don't want anyone to mess with their local schools: Just 37 percent of those polled felt there were too many school districts.

Despite the opening of minds on the issue of consolidation, New Jerseyans remain pessimistic about its effects. When polled in 1994, only 24 percent of Garden State residents believed the quality of local services would get better. Fifteen years later, that number improved by only a single percentage point.

"Right now, if you look at the polls, a large majority of people don't trust government, so you can't expect them to think the government will deliver services more efficiently," said Reed. "Maybe we should be glad the number didn't drop."



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State officials would like Chester Borough, pictured here, and the surrounding Chester Township to merge. A new poll suggests N.J. residents like the idea of consolidating municipalities.