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## Metro-York rolls out merger ideas for police, land use, taxes

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Community volunteers spent a year and a half looking at ways municipalities in the York area can join forces to become more efficient, and now it's time for municipalities to get more involved in the discussion.

The recommendations by the Metro-York group include getting York City and surrounding municipalities to consolidate police departments, cooperate on land-use planning and look at ways to share tax dollars. Studying whether county government needs to be changed, possibly through home rule, is also on the Metro-York list.

All those ideas, announced at a press conference Thursday, involve years of additional research, which Metro-York co-chair Eric Menzer called inevitable.

"If this was about something one municipality could do, then it would be easy, but that's beside the point," Menzer said. "This is about collective action."

Menzer and others in Metro-York said the area needs to look at ways to address the unequal distribution of resources and the problems that come when small municipalities don't cooperate, such as inefficiencies in fighting crime. The group's report points out that a crime that happens on a two-mile stretch of Route 30 could involve as many as four separate police departments.

Municipalities will have to decide whether to participate in a state-sponsored study that will examine the idea of a police merger, and both municipalities and school boards will be able to appoint people to a tax study commission. Votes could come as quickly as in the next few weeks, Menzer said.

Metro-York is a project of YorkCounts, which promotes regionalization in the York area.

**A long road:** Final decision on whether to make any changes on the local or county level could be years away. Discussions are still ongoing about other area-wide recommendations the YorkCounts Commission presented in 2004.

Even after the study, changes will require support from municipal or county government. A proposed county health department already has a potential business plan laid out, but a majority of the commissioners-elect say they will likely vote against the plan, which would require tax dollars.

Though those involved in Metro-York expect some opposition to the recommendations, YorkCounts director James DeBord pointed to the merger between the paid firefighting departments of Spring Garden and Springettsbury townships to demonstrate what can be done.

The merger is the first of its kind in the state, and after years of study, officials say the new department will cost more but provide better service to the townships.

Police chiefs in the York City area have been looking at a police merger for the same reason -- not to reduce costs, but to make services more efficient, said York City Police Commissioner Mark Whitman.

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"As a concept, we're 100 percent behind it," Whitman said. The next step is finding out if the details are doable, he said.

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#### **Metro-York recommendations**

--- **Establish a Metro-York consolidated police department** with a separate revenue source, such as Community Safety Tax, to give it stable funding.

--- **Engage in additional meaningful regional planning** to develop a comprehensive plan and improve land use in the Metro-York region.

--- **Reform local taxation** through a local tax study commission. Possibilities include distributing revenue to municipalities based on their percentage of nonprofit real estate or to school districts based on their residential real estate.

--- **Study ideas for modernizing York County's form of government**, to answer questions that include whether three commissioners are enough to represent a county with 416,000 residents. Home rule is a possibility.

--- **Establish a permanent and well-funded Metro-York Schools Consortium** to research ways to improve York-area schools and push for implementation of its ideas.

--- **Attack the problem of concentrated poverty**, the root cause of problems in York City schools. Possibilities include magnet programs, student exchanges, public charter schools and scholarships to encourage parents to bring middle-class children into city schools.

--- **Invest \$3 million a year into programs targeting at-risk students**, money that would come from state and private sources.

--- **Use the soon-to-be-established Office of Workforce Development** at the York County Economic Development Corp. to strengthen relationships between employers and the work force in the Metro-York area.

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