

York County groups begin to think, plan regionally

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In April, officials from nine municipalities in the heart of York County came together for the first time to discuss public safety.

The group members will continue to gather through the summer as they work to decide what kind of study would provide options for a higher level of public safety within their municipalities.

Some of the people at that table are interested in consolidating services into a regional police department, while others are interested in other options that fall just short of consolidation, said James DeBord, director of [YorkCounts](#).

The public safety initiative was spearheaded by YorkCounts, a nonprofit whose goal is to improve the county's quality of life by helping to build alliances, create community partnerships, spotlight issues and facilitate conversations.

"In the case of public safety, not only is it the No. 1 concern ... but the realities in the fiscal climates that exist in Pennsylvania and America today dictate the need to be finding smarter ways," DeBord said. "Ultimately, I don't know (without conducting a study) if consolidation will result in cost savings, but I have to think there are duplications of services."

The nine municipalities represented have separate police chiefs, captains and lieutenants who use separate cars, equipment and booking processes, DeBord said. Consolidation could be one way to avoid overlap and save money, he said. York County has 20 different police departments, according to USACops.com. There are 72 municipalities in the county.

The effort is just one example of a number of ways that York County groups have begun to dive into the world of regional thinking.

The [York County Planning Commission](#) and the York County Economic Development Corp. over the past year developed a unified strategy that will be the guide for where economic development should occur within the county.

"I think that's a great example of where a county agency and county authority are working together to try to bring the land use and economic development pieces together for the first time," said Eric Menzer, senior vice president for York County-based general contracting firm [Wagman Construction Inc.](#) and the board chairman for YorkCounts. "The days of living at the scale of municipal government are long over. In my view, we ought to be planning and implementing a lot of what we do in terms of local government on a county scale."

In the same way that residents do not spend their lives within a single municipality, businesses generally do not operate within one municipality either, he said. Their employees live within many school districts and multiple municipalities. If a company has more than one location within York County, it might have to deal with a handful of different land use, zoning and permitting entities, he said.

“It introduces an inefficiency,” Menzer said. “If you have 100 employees, chances are they’re from 50 different municipalities. It illustrates sort of this issue of scale.”

There are a number of reasons businesspeople are interested in regionalization and consolidation of services, particularly if it means improving public safety and potentially preventing future tax increases, DeBord said.

“There are more reasons than ever to be looking for cooperation among local governments. The same can be said, too, for school districts,” DeBord said. “It’s clearly, in the case of YorkCounts, more than just talk. We’re out there and actively pursuing regional initiatives.”

The county planning commission also has been helping county groups with their multi-municipality planning initiatives, said Felicia Dell, executive director of the planning commission. The commission recently helped complete a transportation corridor study for York city, Springettsbury Township, Penn State York, York College of Pennsylvania and York Hospital. Five municipalities in the northern end of the county also worked together to create a regional comprehensive plan within the past few years, she said.

Regional thinking and planning has become more of a hot topic for a number of reasons, including the down economy and the need for local governments to consolidate resources and work together to save money, she said.

“The trend is that, yes, there’s more of it (regional thinking and planning). Right now, resources are so darn scarce you can’t get a whole project done unless you share the burden of the funding or the prize of the funding,” Dell said. “I think the economy, as bad as it is, is also making people think about things. I’m sure there are other reasons but, clearly, money talks.”

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Working together

The municipalities involved in the public safety group initiated by YorkCounts include Dover Township, East Manchester Township, Manchester borough, Manchester Township, Mount Wolf borough, Spring Garden Township, Springettsbury Township, West York borough and York city.