

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Municipal #4: Studying ideas for modernizing York County's form of government.

#### **Why is this a recommendation?**

It has been three decades since changes to York County's form of government were last contemplated. At that time, the discussion was about a conversion to Home Rule, in which the county itself gains control over how it will be governed, potentially giving its citizens more of a say. Since then, the county has grown rapidly, with population spreading out from the city, up from Baltimore and down from Harrisburg. Rural land has been developed for housing. The economy has shifted – with the service sector growing and with many “bedroom communities” becoming dependent on long commutes. The costs of providing government services, from health care to incarceration, have risen dramatically. And York County has become proportionally more powerful in Pennsylvania, adding residents as other parts of the state are losing population. In short, a lot has changed in three decades, but York Countians have not looked at whether the current form of county government is as good a fit as it was for the York County of the past.

#### **How did Metro-York reach the decision to include it?**

People in the Municipal Workgroup had wide-ranging opinions about the form of county government. Some thought, for example, that it's hard for a three-person board of commissioners to represent vastly different points of view coming from York city, York's suburbs, the southern end of the county, the northern end of the county, Hanover and other points. Others wondered whether taxes might go down, or might go up, if there are changes – or whether services would be positively or negatively affected. Some said that county government, in itself, is “regional,” and perhaps some public services could be moved to the county level, at a cost savings. In the end, Metro-York participants decided not only that more information is needed, but that it would be irresponsible *not* to study the issue further in light of the way York County has changed in recent decades.

#### **What else can you tell us about it?**

State law dictates that “the decision of whether or not to study a municipal government and consider the advisability of change is made by the voters. At the same time this decision is made, the voters elect a group of citizens to conduct the study and report their recommendations back to the electorate for final decision.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the first step must be to put the question on the ballot: Do the citizens of York County want to study the possibility of change? Also, it's important to note that Home Rule is *not the only alternative form of government that can be considered*. Pennsylvania law allows for both Home Rule government and something known as Optional Plan government, in which home rule powers are not transferred to the county, but the administrative structure could change (for example, shifting to a larger “county council”).

#### **Where else is it being tried?**

Pennsylvania's Home Rule counties include three fast-growing counties (Delaware, Lehigh and Northampton) and three other large counties (Allegheny, Erie and Lackawanna). Right now, Lancaster County is in the middle of studying Home Rule. Lancaster County voters approved the formation of a commission. That commission, in turn recommended two months ago that a Home Rule charter be drafted.

#### **What happens next?**

The champions of this recommendation will look into the formation of a Government Study Commission, which would have to be approved by voters. It could be added to the ballot in one of two ways: the York County commissioners could place it on the ballot by ordinance; or the citizens of York County could petition (about 6300 signatures would be needed).

#### **What are, realistically, some obstacles this idea faces?**

The main issue involves winning the agreement of the citizens of York County that a study should be undertaken. It's important to note that voters would be asked not whether government should be changed, but rather whether the idea should be reviewed. Down the road, voters would have the chance to give a thumbs-up or thumbs-down to the concrete idea of a Home Rule charter or Optional Plan of government.

1. *Home Rule in Pennsylvania*, Seventh Edition. Governor's Center for Local Government Services/Department of Community and Economic Development. March 2003. <http://www.celdf.org/portals/0/pdf/Home%20Rule%20in%20PA.pdf> and available via [yorkcounts.org/metro](http://yorkcounts.org/metro).

