

State to fund study of Upper Township-Corbin City merger
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UPPER TOWNSHIP - The state agreed this week to study merging the township with Corbin City.

The Department of Community Affairs approved a \$20,000 study to determine the financial and tax implications for residents in both towns if Upper Township absorbed the smallest city in New Jersey.

The proposal has the backing of Atlantic and Cape May County officials, at the recommendation of their respective shared-services coordinators.

Under the proposal, Corbin City would become part of Cape May County and would dissolve its local governing body. Upper Township would expand its borders

Corbin City and Upper Township are very similar in geography, population density and socio-economics. Students already attend Upper Township schools. Both towns send students to Ocean City High School.

The merger would have to be equitable to taxpayers in both places, Upper Township Mayor Richard Palombo said.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable going back to Upper Township residents and saying 'You're going to pay more in taxes because of this,'" he said.

State Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, said all eyes will be on the two towns to see whether such a merger will work.

"If you can't do it here, where can you do it?" Van Drew asked. "They're two towns with tremendous similarities - socially and demographically. They would mesh very well."

Van Drew said the key is for the state to smooth the way for such a merger if New Jersey has any hope at all of consolidating any of its 566 municipalities and 616 school districts.

"This will not make a huge dent that will reverberate from Bergen County to Cape May. But it shows it can be done," he said.

Atlantic County Executive Dennis Levinson said the state must consider the tax revenue his county would lose with Corbin City's departure. At about \$30 million, Corbin City has the smallest share of assessed property value of Atlantic County's 23 towns. To put that in perspective, Corbin City's total property value represents a few floors in the new \$255 million tower that opened in October at Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort.

But every dollar in lost taxable property means a bigger burden for Atlantic County taxpayers.

"For Atlantic County to lose a substantial amount of real estate, it has to be made up by the remaining 22 municipalities," Levinson said. "The consolidation has merits, but it has drawbacks, too."

Upper Township's Palombo said the township will not give up on the idea, even if the study finds a glaring disparity. The mayor said the township will turn to lawmakers and Gov. Jon S. Corzine to find an answer to this taxation teeter-totter.

"If this is a doable thing, it could be a model for other towns in New Jersey," Palombo said.

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