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The dandelion that is a city-county merger

By Colin McNickle

We've lost count of how many times the "we-know-better crowd" has proposed a Pittsburgh-Allegheny County merger. And never mind that it repeatedly, as it is said, "had no legs," a new merger proposal has popped up like a stubborn crop of dandelions.

"In short, in decades past and continuing through the present, residents and taxpayers in the county's municipalities have shown no interest in merging municipalities or merging the city and county," says Frank Gamrat, executive director of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

"There is no evidence that will change," he notes (in *Policy Brief Vol. 20, No. 13*). "And for good economic reasons."

The latest merger talk comes in an extended commentary in the spring 2020 issue of Pittsburgh Quarterly magazine. It offers a 10-point plan in pursuit of "facing facts and seizing opportunity" for "Pittsburgh tomorrow."

From allowing municipalities within the county to remain independent or voluntarily disincorporate and merge into a larger City of Pittsburgh, to claiming that bigger is better with many advantages (including, but not limited to, greater cost efficiencies), the proposal often whistles past history and human nature.

Never mind an existing state law that allows something much similar has produced a paucity of change. And never mind there is no evidence that a merged Pittsburgh-Allegheny County will result in efficiency, especially financial efficiency.

"No one brings up the most prominent city-county merger in Pennsylvania—Philadelphia," reminds Gamrat. Philadelphia has been under Pennsylvania Intergovernmental Cooperation Authority financial oversight since 1990 -- 30 years and counting.

"Typically, larger cities, like Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, are beset with enormous legacy costs, such as general obligation debt and unfunded pension liabilities," notes the Ph.D. economist.

“Merging these cities with smaller municipalities, many of which have avoided such problems, is a nonstarter for residents unwilling to take on the enormous responsibility of helping pay for the actions of decision-makers for whom they had no vote.”

Indeed, the magazine’s entreaty for merger also reiterates some commonsense moves that we’ve advocated for decades – from eliminating duplicative services to contracting out others.

“But public sector unions create major impediments to either merging or contracting out,” Gamrat says. “The unions will vigorously and forcefully reject contracting out to vendors and prevent possible large cost savings ever being undertaken.”

And with merging departments and functions, there can be enormous problems stemming from the differences in pay and benefit packages, not to mention differing work rules, job classifications and descriptions contained in the municipality and county contracts.

“Typically, the higher wage rate and benefit packages prevail and no-layoff provisions – ‘poison pills’ -- prevent cost savings and efficiency improvements,” Gamrat says.

But there’s another reason there’s been little to no appetite for a Pittsburgh-Allegheny County merger: Sound human nature.

“Whether the pro-merger commentators like it or not, residents of the various municipalities like their towns and whatever distinctiveness as an individual community it has,” Gamrat says. “They like being close enough to the commissioners and/or mayor that they can have a meaningful voice in the important local decisions that must be made.

“And while some view the current situation as inefficient and parochial, there are subjective valuations about neighborhoods and community that people place large value upon and will resist stubbornly any effort to take those away,” the think tank scholar concludes.

Back to those stubborn dandelions.

Such weeds keep popping up primarily because their deep roots aren’t removed. That a misguided Pittsburgh-Allegheny County merger keeps popping up suggests that its deep roots should be treated with the most powerful herbicide known in sound public policy – *the facts*.

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