

## Leadership NJ Forum on the Future

October 15, 2008

NJN Studios, Trenton

### ***Should New Jersey Start Over with a Clean Slate and a Fresh Start?***

Topic 1: State, County, and Municipal Governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century New Jersey:

How many is too many agencies of government?  
Dianne Brake, President, PlanSmart NJ

Although he was not the first to comment on it, Alan Karcher really laid out the case in his book, *Municipal Madness* – “There are too many municipalities!!” Which seems so true – do we really need so many towns in such a small state, some of them with a population of less than 50? There ***are*** probably too many municipalities and we ***should*** reduce the number of municipalities!

But that acknowledgement immediately pushes you to the next problem – How many is too many?

Now, please don't think that I believe that 566 municipalities is just the right number for New Jersey! I have been a part of PlanSmart NJ for almost 25 years and we have promoted regional cooperation and planning all that time. Towns with a population of less than 50 is pretty indefensible. But, while towns with less than 1000 in such a developed state as New Jersey certainly is worth questioning, we do have areas of New Jersey that are rural enough that such a population may be considered a big place.

So looking at municipal population may not be the ultimate threshold for reducing the number.

Promoting shared services is always worthwhile, but a Task Force I was on in the Florio Administration pointed out that whereas there may be some one-time savings, there is not really a huge dollar amount of savings when you consider that the same total population must be served.

So my answer is that too many municipalities is not the right way to frame the problem. The problem is not the number it is the fragmentation and the lack of coordination. The problem is we have too many municipalities all acting as if they were single players on an empty stage. And they are all being asked to accomplish things outside of their control.

We currently expect 566 municipalities – in the course of taking care of local business – to take care of state and regional business as well, and they ***cannot do*** the job! We have set them up to fail. And they are taking the state with it.

Does anyone really believe that we can meet Greenhouse Gas emission reduction targets, create a transit-oriented land use pattern, protect bio-diversity, provide an adequate water supply, reduce flooding, create economic prosperity and produce enough affordable housing – do all the things the State needs to do, by acting independently.

Each municipality can only affect a small piece of each of these regional systems. If we reduced the number of towns from 566 to 21, we would still fail to solve these problems – ***if we don't have a framework in which the actions of many separate players are coordinated to create the outcomes that we want.***

Innovations in global business provide some models for us. They are learning from Complexity Theory to abandon a command-and-control approach to management that can never work over many different countries and cultures. Instead, they are developing a working framework for keeping the cumulative impact of many separate decision-makers moving toward collective goals.

The example that scientists studied to develop Complexity Theory was a large flock of migrating birds – an excellent analogy for Multiple Municipal Madness. Scientists determined that the birds innately followed a few simple rules to keep them from running into each other and help them to reach their destination as a group.

We can do that here – set performance measures for jobs, housing, transportation, water, social justice, and cost efficiency for the state. Use these as the framework for coordinating the actions of all the players in the system. Such a framework would work with Home Rule, not against it. It would not require another layer of government or demand much change to existing County powers. It simply means taking state goals and getting serious about meeting them. It is about time – in every sense of the word.

As we proceed today, let's be clear about how we frame the problems because it may put us on the wrong track to meaningful solutions. What do we really want? What will get us that outcome? That is what I hope we will hear today. Thanks.