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Small towns stand to lose aid

Those with less than 10,000 people would get less money unless they consolidate.

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With only one town having a population over 10,000 in Warren County and just four above that figure in neighboring Sussex County, the two rural northwestern New Jersey counties could become poster children for Gov. Jon Corzine's plan to consolidate small towns.

Mayors in those counties experienced firsthand the sticker shock of seeing how much state aid they could lose if they fail to consolidate with other towns to bring their populations over 10,000.

Because his town has fewer than 5,000 residents, Mayor Timothy McDonough of Hope Township, population 1,974, said his town stands to lose \$60,000 of aid it receives.

Because his town has more than 5,000 residents but fewer than 10,000, Mayor Paul Crowley of Franklin Borough, Sussex County, said his town stands to lose half the state aid, or \$100,000.

Because Hope is patrolled by state police, it could be hit with a double whammy, as the governor wants towns to begin paying for such law enforcement coverage.

McDonough on Thursday will be among a contingent of small-town mayors meeting in Trenton during a gathering between the League of Municipalities and representatives of Corzine's office.

"Hopefully, they'll listen," said McDonough, first vice president of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities. "This governor didn't become head of Goldman and Sachs without knowing the art of negotiating."

McDonough doesn't know what his already stretched thin local government can cut.

"We can't go cut a garbage man -- we don't have any garbage men," he said.

In the past, McDonough said, Hope officials have considered proposals to merge with other northern Warren County towns, only to come to the conclusion it wasn't cost-effective. He said he wouldn't be averse to merging with a neighboring town such as Frelinghuysen Township, population 2,218, as long as the governor could offer concrete proof that such mergers would be beneficial.

"Show us where it makes sense to do that," McDonough said.

Half of Warren County's 22 municipalities have fewer than 5,000 residents and 13 of Sussex County's 24 municipalities are below that figure.

Phillipsburg is Warren County's lone town with more than 10,000 residents, although Hackettstown has teetered on both sides of that figure since the 2000 census.

Independence Township, Warren County, which has a population of 5,770 and budget of \$3 million, stands to lose close to \$120,000, Mayor Robert Giordano said.

"I think it's totally ridiculous," he said.

As it is, Giordano said, there is only a clerk and assistant in the township building.

Independence Township maintains its own police department, but it is down to eight police officers. The township has shared services, merging its school district with Liberty Township.

"I don't know how much more we can do," Giordano said. "We're down to the bare bones. You take away a police officer, that means we don't have full-time coverage. I'm as frustrated as all of the other mayors."

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