The great Syracuse experiment: Will a large-scale municipal consolidation fall victim to politics?

By JIMMY VIELKIND | 11/11/16 05:18 AM EST

Onondaga County covers 778 square miles and is home to 468,463 people. They support 18 school districts, 19 towns, 15 villages and the city of Syracuse, which holds just under a third of its population. And those 469,463 people are serviced by 36 highway departments, 57 fire departments, 15 police agencies, 17 tax assessors, 36 municipal clerks and a public library system.

But if a certain segment of community leaders has its way, all of that will be replaced by a newer numerical superlative: upstate New York's largest municipality. The state's largest community outside of New York City. A metropolitan system of government similar to...
what you would find in Portland, Oregon or Louisville, Kentucky.

For the last two years, a commission of business, government and academic leaders called “Consensus” has examined the structure of local governments in Onondaga County.

They’ve spent the last nine months gathering feedback on a preliminary set of recommendations — including the city-county merger — and hope to have final proposals solidified by the end of November. If things proceed apace, a referendum on the consolidation could go before voters next year.

If approved, it would be the first large-scale consolidation in the Empire State since greater New York City was formed from communities within its five boroughs in 1898. It could provide a model for other communities, and would be a major boost for Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s ongoing push to streamline local government.

“I think that there’s an enormous view in New York that structural change is impossible, and there are impediments to structural change based upon self-interest. So it would be encouraging if we were to try it, and if it wasn’t fully successful, we’ll know,” said Gerald Benjamin, a professor at SUNY New Paltz and director of a government research center there that bears his name. “It’s not entirely comfortable to be the guinea pig, but Syracuse and Onondaga County are the right scale for trying this out.”

But the thing about consolidation plans — pretty on paper, beloved by the wonk class, technocratic masterpieces standing out amid pools of political muck — is that they usually fail.

A 2004 proposal to merge Erie County and Buffalo fizzled thanks to suburban opposition. Former Schenectady Mayor Al Jurczynski mentioned a city-county consolidation in a 1996 speech, but it went no further, and Albany Mayor Kathy Sheehan last year, speaking at a panel on child poverty, dreamed of merging the capital city with the neighboring town of Colonie. (The key word there is dreamed.)

So facing a flood of concerns from suburbanites worried they would be saddled with the urban woes and city residents concerned they would lose control over their own destiny, Consensus extended its comment period and quietly walked away from plans to hold a referendum this year. It is fleshing out and honing the 51 recommendations in its 80-page preliminary report which its co-chair Jim Walsh, a former congressman, said will be released by the end of November.

“I’m guardedly optimistic that a lot of these recommendations will be accepted. Will they
all be accepted? Probably not. Will the big one be accepted? The jury’s still out. ... but we want to give [citizens] every possibility to understand what is at stake and what is possible,” Walsh said. “We want the next generation and generation after that to have the opportunities that we had. On the trajectory that we’re on right now, they won’t.”

When Joanie Mahoney thinks about consolidation, she thinks of the snow plows.

The county executive, a Republican, noted that her hometown is a regular winner of the “Golden Snowball” award, an informal competition with other upstate metropolises over who can clock the highest snowfall accumulations.

For some reason, there are a half-dozen people charged with coordinating efforts to deal with it.

“In the metropolitan area with the most snow, why do you have state plows, city plows, county plows, school district plows, village plows, town plows? Syracuse New York can draw plow routes without these fake geographic borders!” she said in a recent interview. “You see these state plows come in and when they hit the county line they lift the plow up, and the school district plows don’t plow on their way to the parking lots of the schools. It’s insane.”

Mahoney has been a supporter of Consensus from the start, and embraced its merger recommendation. She sees plenty of opportunities to make government more efficient, and hopefully, cost less for taxpayers.

But how much less?

The Consensus report estimated that the governments of Onondaga County spent $100 million on redundant services, and described an “opportunity” to reduce spending by $20 million immediately — about $200 per household, per year. Without action, the report found, 20 out of the 35 towns and villages will face budget deficits within the next decade.

Consolidation proponents are sometimes loath to put a firm number on the plan for a variety of reasons. There are no hard estimates available, and even if there were, the actual results would vary. Any such deviation, of course, would fuel the opposition. And savings in dollars and cents often translate to lost jobs for clerks, drivers, or DPW workers.

Walsh said that cost savings is “not the primary goal” but “would be great.” A merger is about “sending signals to the business community” that Syracuse is a “different, progressive, forward-looking” place.
Centerstate CEO is the leading business group in Central New York, and its president, Rob Simpson, has been a staunch backer of the merger. Yes, it will make it easier to do business, but it should also cost less.

"With $1.7 billion in total government spending this is not going to generate savings? That just doesn't pass the smell test," he said. “People can question that argument all they want, but to me it is incomprehensible to say that no savings are going to be generated."

But some people are questioning that argument.

One is Jim Rowley, an accountant and the former supervisor of Clay, which lies just north of Syracuse. While in charge, he folded Clay’s town police force into the county sheriff’s department, and he wondered pointedly why the government of Onondaga County — Mahoney’s own house — hadn’t consolidated the administration of its two jails.

Talk of savings by officials who had not taken action, Rowley wrote in letter to the Post-Standard, “lacks transparency at best or is disingenuous at worst.”

A different concern drives Khalid Bey, a member of the Syracuse City Council, who said the idea of letting Onondaga County envelope the city government could disenfranchise black residents like himself. According to the Census Bureau, black people comprise 30 percent of the city’s population, but 11 percent of the county.

“We’re very concerned that the city would become a taxable but under-represented area,” Bey said during an interview at a downtown coffee shop. “The city didn’t ask anybody to bail us out of anything. ... Imagine you fall on hard times, you fall behind on your mortgage. I come and offer to you, ‘How about you sell me your house, you’ll move upstairs and I’ll take over the downstairs?’ We didn’t ask for their help. To come and force an idea on you, and to force it in a way that you don’t accept but even the towns don’t accept was very, very dismissive and disrespectful to voters within the city.”

Bey also brought up a key reason that mergers have sputtered in other places: smaller, local governments are more accountable to voters, who are often willing to pay a premium for a personal touch. If there is consolidation, he said, he wants the city departments to take over for the county in a “center out” approach.

“Government is about people. It’s not about your dollar,” he said. “If people are not at the center of the discussion, there isn’t much to talk about — government isn’t built on dollars and cents alone.”
During an interview at a café near Franklin Square, Mahoney absorbed both of their points without cracking her regular cheery disposition. To the suburbanites like Rowley — whose municipalities would only join a metropolitan government if they opted in — she says, “You’re kidding yourself if you don’t think you’re already paying for the problems of the city.”

Her message to city naysayers like Bey is more pointed.

“The lightbulb moment, I think for a lot of people in the African-American community is, ‘Well, how’s it going now?’” Mahoney said. “We’re talking all the time about being the community with the highest concentrated poverty. We have fewer than 50 percent of our kids graduating from high school inside the city. ... So do you not even allow for the possibility than it can get better? You’re resisting change when these are the current circumstances.”

Hovering over this relatively substantive debate is a long-simmering political feud and the spectre of Cuomo, a Democrat who has nibbled at the overlapping layers of local government here since 2009, when he was attorney general.

The governor ran around the state then, decrying more than 10,000 local government entities that he said were the real driver behind local property taxes, and campaigned for a new law that would make it easier for people to vote them out of existence.

Few of them did. Many more realized that the actual number of government entities is closer to 4,000 — still high, of course — and that citizens tend to like theirs just fine. Frustrated, the governor has tried to stack the fiscal case for voters, offering rebate checks for municipalities that stay under the two percent property tax cap and develop plans to lower taxes by consolidating their operations.

But nothing has made a major splash. So Cuomo was naturally intrigued by Consensus’ work, praising Mahoney and Stephanie Miner, the mayor of Syracuse, in his 2014 State of the State presentation and helping provide financial support for the initial study work.

And then he offered a huge carrot: $25 million over the next five years to help make consolidation a reality. The funding was baked into a $500 million competitive grant won by Simpson and the Central New York Regional Economic Development Council and the governor, in recent trips to the area, has said the possible merger was a key factor in its victory.

“Cities and counties in upstate New York have to be solvent,” Cuomo told reporters in
January — before Consensus issued its recommendations but after the funding award. “If a county or city can’t pay their bills, they have to find a way to pay their bills. The answer is not to go to the state and ask for a handout. ... Cut costs, share services, consolidate or merge.”

While the money will help keep communities whole and win over skeptics, its arrival has become an item of contention in an odd, three-way fight between Cuomo, Mahoney, and Miner. As recently as 2012, everyone got along well: Mahoney had crossed party lines to endorse Cuomo in his election, Cuomo named Miner as vice chair of the Democratic State Committee, and Mahoney and Miner had consolidated their economic development staffs — an unprecedented measure of cooperation.

Trouble started when Miner publicly critiqued Cuomo in 2013 for failing to help out cash-strapped cities. The governor, not known for responding to slights by turning his other cheek, immediately began working with Mahoney on projects in the region and purposefully froze the Syracuse mayor out.

Miner continued to criticize both Mahoney and Cuomo on multiple fronts, and has dragged her feet regarding the merger.

“There are huge questions out there that haven’t been answered,” Miner declared during a speech in March.

Relations between the mayor and county executive have basically broken off. At the end of October, the much-vaunted consolidation of economic development staffs ended in a dispute over philosophy, money and (though no one would admit it) simple personal strife.

Mahoney declared that after Miner and Cuomo had their falling out, Miner “has made it very difficult for people around here to work with state government.”

All parties are now waiting for an updated set of recommendations that Walsh, the Consensus co-chair, said will come by the end of November. He danced delicately around the political situation.

“Ultimately, this is a local initiative. We’re appreciative of the governor’s support, but this decision is going to be made locally,” he said. “You don’t want anybody to put their thumb on the scale too heavily.”