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Hugh Reynolds

Hugh Reynolds: Consolidation without tears

by [Hugh Reynolds](#) / July 9, 2017 / 0 comments[Tweet](#)

Ulster County's application for \$20 million in state funding to consolidate services and launch several major public-works projects seems to have legs in Albany. It is one of six counties still in the running.

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would suggest last week's release by County Executive **Mike Hein** left out almost as much as it announced.

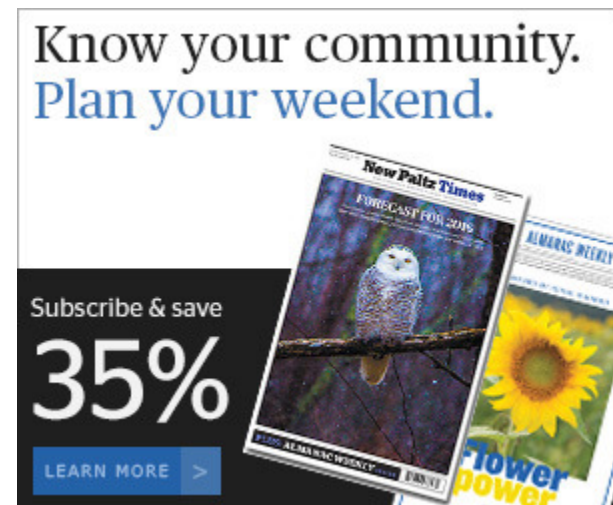
For example, the plan proposes elimination of the village government of Ellenville, no mean feat given New York's strong home-rule tradition. The support of urban planners in Albany and Kingston does not suffice. Nor should it.

Given the news, an update of a previous announcement, village residents could be feeling whipsawed. In an election race two years ago, Hein proposed investing a million dollars, "the Ellenville million," to revive the village. With this application for state funds, he now seeks a municipal merger.

Village officials did not return phone calls.

Given the Ellenville initiative, I wonder whether eliminating the village level is such a capital idea. Why not Saugerties and New Paltz as well? Might that not be an even more tempting treat to place before the governor? Like the grab-bag package the county administration put together for federal stimulus funding in 2009, this application to the state does have broad appeal in addressing consolidation, firematic and education issues.

The long-delayed establishment of a fire-training center someplace



other than Cottekill is a work in progress. It could lead to the consolidation of some of the county's 49 volunteer fire districts. Fire protection is near and dear to residents, so there will be local resistance to eliminating fire companies.

The executive says that it will take only \$150,000 to convert a closed grade school in Milton which now serves as Marlborough's town hall and houses the school district's administrative offices into a southern satellite for SUNY Ulster. That strikes me as an opening gambit in an in-for-a-dime-in-for-a-dollar proposition. A similar project in Midtown Kingston two years ago cost north of \$7 million.

New Paltz has been talking consolidation for years and will probably be doing so into mid-century. Marbletown and Rosendale effected a consolidation of sorts in taking over an abandoned grade school building in Cottekill for town offices for both townships. Saugerties has merged its town and police departments to positive effect.

For better or worse, people like their government close, even if it costs more. Will the county's application pass final muster? Could be. After that would come the heavy lifting.

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Bridges of character

Call me sentimental, but I like bridges, be they of the 19th-century wooden variety like Perrine's Bridge in Rifton, Kingston's iconic suspension span Wurts Street Bridge or the recently renovated steel structure in Eddyville. Bridges are gateways to communities. Let them soar.

Two bridges we viewed over the weekend don't fit that bill.

There's the new Carmine Liberta Bridge at the west end of New Paltz, known more for county-community cooperation in its planning and construction than for aesthetic value. It's just a flat extension of the road into the village, with rusty rails, yet. Yuk. I don't think **Clint Eastwood** will be coming here to take photos of that bridge, like he did (in the movie) in Madison County.

A few miles away, officials say fast-track construction on replacing the old bridge over the Rondout Creek at High Falls will be completed in a few weeks. Good for traffic and area merchants, but yet another cookie-cutter county bridge, albeit built and paid for mostly by the state

I appreciate that cost and down-time are important factors in bridge building, but spread over generations relatively small investments

in superstructure can have a positive effect on community pride, maybe even tourism.

Charter time

While we're on the subject of reform, a group hailing to the website [Kingston Citizens.org](http://KingstonCitizens.org) has invited the public to a seminar on “charters and reform in the City of Kingston” at the library on Franklin Street from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Thursday, July 13.

While I may be outside this loop, I haven't heard of any significant groundswell for charter reform in Kingston. At the least, seminar hosts **Gerry Benjamin** and Legislator **Jennifer Schwartz Berky** will bring generic experience. Benjamin, a retired SUNY New Paltz political science professor, is widely considered the father of the 2006 county charter. Berky, an urban planner by profession and a former planner for the county, served on that charter commission.

The city's current charter dates to 1994, following several one-term mayors and voter approval of a city-manager form of government the year before. Among other reforms, the charter, driven by new mayor **T.R. Gallo**, solidified the city's strong-mayor form of govern-

ment by rendering all mayorally-appointed boards advisory and extending the chief executive's term from two to four years.

Charter reform tends to follow crises, but that's seldom the best time to make critical decisions that could impact generations. The county charter was the product of the jail debacle, for instance, rendering the call for a strong, accountable executive almost irresistible. (It passed by only a few percentage points.)

That said, it's not a bad idea periodically to review basic structure. I can't help wondering whether Benjamin and Berky aren't looking more toward a state constitutional convention, which could be on the ballot in November.

Reports out of Sullivan County, the poor man of the Hudson Valley, indicate an interest in an executive form of government. In these fast moving times, legislative debate can be an unaffordable luxury. Absent checks and balances, a strong executive is not necessarily the answer. Tread carefully, Sullivan.

Independences' day

There weren't any press releases on the shakeup in the leadership of

the misleadingly-named Independence Party last month. On orders from state party headquarters in Albany, Ulster chairman **Joe Di-Falco** of Kingston was replaced by former party chairman **Len** (as in back again) **Bernardo** of Accord. The ever-active Bernardo, a former candidate for county executive and husband of former county legislature chairwoman **Terry Bernardo**, is running for Rochester town supervisor this year.

At a Democratic convention in Kingston late last month, I asked the recently deposed DiFalco about that bit of party business. “I wasn’t the chairman,” he said. “There is no Ulster County Independence Party. It’s all run out of Albany.”

Then why, I asked, were all these people (at convention) chasing your party’s nomination?

In fact, the Independence Party, which according to its former chairman doesn’t exist, is with its 14 endorsees the majority party in the 23-member Ulster County Legislature. Republicans caucus with 12 legislators (thus the majority), Democrats with 11. Indies, as they are called, do not caucus as a party.

For candidates seeking that extra bump, the Indy line can be consequential. Esopus Legislator **Carl Belfiglio**, running for re-election as a

Republican two years ago, with Indy endorsement beat Democratic challenger **Roscoe Pecora** by just 74 votes. He got 130 on the Independence line. Belfiglio is running for town supervisor this year.

That the party seems to stand for almost nothing other than “independence,” and that a goodly number of non-enrolled voters view themselves as “independent,” make it even more attractive. No baggage.

So, goodbye, Joe, you had to go. Welcome back Len, again. As for the Independence Party, how about a name change?

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