

One New Paltz?

New Paltz town, village mull \$50K unification grant

The New Paltz town and village boards moved ever closer to applying for a \$50,000 Department of State grant to study options for a possible merger of the two local governments. If the boards do apply for the funds, that study would find the most efficient, economic and beneficial form of government for the entire New Paltz community. That includes consolidation, merger, co-terminus boundaries, becoming a small city or something not yet defined.

On a snowy morning, village representatives, grant writer Nikki Koenig and Gerald Benjamin's team from SUNY New Paltz's Regional Engagement and Director of the Center

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for Research, Regional Education and Outreach (CRREO) met to discuss how to pursue the \$50,000 grant opportunity.

Because of the snowstorm, town representatives scheduled to attend – town Supervisor Toni Hokanson and Councilwoman Kitty Brown – had to cancel. As Benjamin's team had already been assembled and could walk to Village Hall, the meeting went forward without the town.

Benjamin noted that there are "plenty of models out there – applications to the Secretary of State's office that are part of the public record and have been numerous over the past two years."

In fact, the Department of State has been pushing government efficiency, consolidation, shared services for the past two years, offering grant money

to study and implement any reduction of duplication that can be determined and ultimately remedied.

Village Mayor Terry Dungan received and was granted permission from his board last year to ask the Town Board if they'd be interested in pursuing a similar grant. He noted that there was a real desire from the state for local governments to pursue consolidation and shared services.

The Town Board agreed that it was a worthwhile application and Supervisor Hokanson went ahead and wrote the grant application – only to have the Village Board vote 3-2 against even applying for a grant, the mayor being the swing vote against it.

He claimed at the time that there was no evidence or outcry from village residents to reconsider the idea of consolidation after they had voted it down 15 years earlier. Consolidation was and is only one of many potential government efficiency subjects that would be studied and possibly recommended.

This year, several residents and stakeholders urged the Village Board to simply apply for the grant in an effort to have an objective study and document. Such a report could be used to move away from anecdotal opinions on what the best government structure should be to a more non-emotional discussion based, in part, on empirical data.

Benjamin suggested that the grant writer create a concept summary, showing the need and desire from both boards to fund such a study.

"The application needs to be neutral as to the various alternatives that would be considered," he said. "There should also be language in there that leaves open a prospect that is not listed; something that would require special legislation that is not yet

defined by law and not the standard 'co-terminus, consolidation, city,' but something more creative and applicable to New Paltz."

He also said that, in his experience writing these grants, the boards should have "absolutely no premise about a preferred outcome and that you (the two boards) insist on an implementation plan."

Benjamin added: "There are a lot of these applications that receive funding, studies and then nothing moves forward. It's a waste. We need an implementation plan that engages the community, disseminates the facts."

The CRREO director referenced Mayor Dungan's statements from last year, when he said that there was no need to "study this again."

Dungan said that he remembered passionate residents, scholars and historians coming forward and providing reports that supported the need for or opposition to consolidation more than a decade and a half ago.

"But is there a public record?" asked Benjamin.

"No there was not," Dungan said.

"That's irresponsible," responded Benjamin. "Let's be honest. It's expensive to live here. People are losing their jobs. Property values are dropping precipitously. The responsible thing to do is to take a hard look at the best options available to New Paltz – both economically and in terms of best planning for and preserving our community."

The following week, Councilwoman Brown, Supervisor Hokanson along with the grant writer, representatives of CRREO and members of the Village Board followed up on the previous meeting. They determined to have each board move forward with resolutions supporting the grant and for the town to be lead agency.

"It was a very productive meeting," Brown said. "I'm excited that we are moving in this direction. We have to each pass a resolution, vet the concept statement and then make sure we have our application in the mail by March 11."

She and Benjamin were cautious to note that the town claiming lead agency was a formality and that it would mean only that "we are the administrative body for the financing of the grant."

"We're who the state would send checks to and who would then send the matching portion of the grant to the state," Brown added.

"Typically the town is always lead agency because they generally have the largest population," Benjamin said.

The grant, if awarded, could offer up to \$50,000 for study and implementation. The town-village matching portion of the grant would be 10 percent.

– Erin Quinn