

Architects of Princeton's Consolidation Join Forces to Form a New Partnership

As Princeton has made it's way through the process of consolidation, representatives from other municipalities have been watching with interest. Now, nearly six months since it took effect, three key architects of the merger of borough and township have decided to share their expertise with a new strategic partnership.

Anton Lahnston, who chaired the Joint Shared Services and Consolidation Study Commission; Chad Goerner, former mayor of Princeton Township; and Joseph Stefko, president and chief executive officer of CGR (Center for Governmental Research) the lead consultant for Princeton's efforts, have formed GovWorks, a partnership with CGR that will offer assistance not only to those municipalities considering consolidation, but also those interested in shared services and other ideas that improve efficiency.

"The success we've had has spurred a lot of interest throughout the state," said Mr. Goerner. "And 'Courage to Connect' [a non-profit that encourages municipal consolidation and held a conference in Princeton this month] has really fostered that discussion. Granted, it took us five decades to do this," he added, referring to the fact that consolidation has been a local topic of interest for several decades. "But there is an opportunity to share what we've learned."

Mr. Lahnston said the three partners had informal discussions throughout the consolidation process that became more formal as it was put into place. Calling Mr. Goerner "the guiding light" in the idea, he said, "I think it makes sense to take some of the experiences we went through and share them with other communities. We can help guide the process. And some of the work that would be focused on is what I have come to think of as service optimization. I think that's really it."

GovWorks is being launched with a special "white paper" series of short essays on the fiscal and operational challenges facing municipalities. The first in the series, "To Tackle Tough Government Efficiency Issues, Develop a Framework for Decision-Making," outlines five steps that they consider crucial to success. Mr. Lahnston, Mr. Goerner, and Mr. Stefko will host their first webinar on July 25.

Working with Princeton to bring about consolidation since 2010, CGR, which is based in Rochester, New York, developed a strong relationship with the town that will transfer to the new initiative, according to Mr. Stefko. "I think Princeton offers some significant lessons for other communities," he said. "A lot can be learned from the process. The bottom line is that it is not unique in the kind of questions it was asking about taxes, competitiveness, fiscal issues, and service sustainability. These are all questions being asked across New Jersey and the northeast. Certainly, that's what we've seen at CGR in the last ten years or so."

All three principals emphasize that GovWorks is not just about consolidation. "In some cases consolidation is misinterpreted as being the only solution, and that just isn't the case," Mr. Lahnston said. "There are lots of opportunities for services to be combined in creative ways." Mr. Goerner adds, "Frankly, consolidation isn't right for every town. But it is one option in our tool kit. Inside of that kit, some towns may opt to share services. There is also service optimization, which is trying to find ways to run a leaner and more efficient organization. Some just need to streamline, they don't need to consolidate like we did."

GovWorks is a part-time endeavor for the partners. Mr. Goerner is an advisor at UBS Financial Services Inc. Mr. Lahnston is an independent management consulting professional. Mr. Stefko, who runs CGR, said, "We feel the relationship with GovWorks is a big value add for us. It deepens our capacity to deliver these innovative services to local governments precisely when they're needed the most. These are challenging economic times."

The principals are working on how to market their services to interested municipalities. "I think CGR would say they've been a reactive organization in some respects," said Mr. Lahnston. "They hear about a request for a proposal and they respond to it, and they do it really well. But the alternative is to be more pro-active. We want to go to market as a collaborative force. This is CGR's business and they've been in it for a long time, and they are really good at it. What we're working on is making it more integrative and reactive."

Written by: [Anne Levin](#)

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