

Two Focus Groups Concerning Consolidation and/or Shared Services

Summary Report Prepared for:

**Joint Commission on Consolidation/Shared Services,
Princeton Borough and Township**

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Includes:

- Why we Conducted Focus Groups
- Key Findings
- Additional Findings

Appendices

- 1) List of key values mentioned by focus group participants
- 2) Methodology
- 3) Demographics
- 4) Discussion guide
- 5) Demographic/support questions

Why We Conducted Focus Groups

"Focus groups" were conducted in order to openly discuss the concerns and opportunities that Princeton Borough and Princeton Township residents face as they consider whether to consolidate and/or share the services of police and public works. The focus groups were conducted by a professional facilitator and participants were randomly selected from voter registration lists. Participants included both Township and Borough residents.

Key Findings

A single community, divided into two municipalities

Princeton residents, as typified by the participants in two focus groups conducted April 9 and 14, vary on whether they know their friends are Borough vs. Township residents. Even neighbors are not always clear, depending, or so some claim, on seeing which plow stops where in winter.

Most dimensions that might distinguish Borough from Township residents appear far more graded than binary: Township residents along with Borough residents highly value the density and vibrancy of Princeton's downtown, largely independent of their distance from the downtown. Borough residents as well as Township value open space, and all comment on the beauty of both landscape and streetscape. (See Appendix 1 for a full list of values mentioned.)

All value the Princeton Public Library and the Princeton Regional School District, and many cite the schools as a model for consolidation. Focus group participants differed somewhat in their emphasis on the schools, but more by age, rather than by Borough or Township residence.

General support for consolidation

Most participants came to the groups favoring consolidation (15 of the 24) or leaning toward favoring it (6 of the 24). As one participant said, the two municipalities are already joined psychologically. Consolidation would confirm this psychological union at the municipal level, as well as create increased efficiencies over time, for instance with a single Public Works Department plowing the area as a whole, and possibly increased quality as well as having some of the current inefficiencies fade.

No participant came to the group opposing consolidation or leaning toward opposition. Three of the 24 said they were neutral, neither leaning for nor against consolidation.

Most participants were at least vaguely aware of opposition, but some claimed complete ignorance of why someone would oppose consolidation. Several pointed to opposition in the past from influential individuals in the Borough, but speculated that their influence may have waned.

Finances of consolidation: if differential impact, then must both be fair and appear fair

Residents see unnecessary duplication in the administration of two municipal governments, police, and public works departments, and in the past construction/renovation and current maintenance of the two municipal buildings (much as they may like one or both of those buildings). They see "bickering" and inefficiencies when the two municipalities try to work together, for instance on the community pool. They seem less aware of cost cutting that has already taken place, such as the elimination of pedestrian and bicycle patrols by Borough police. As a result, while they understand that consolidation deals with

only the municipalities, and thus only a quarter of their property taxes, and while they understand that consolidation may bring additional transitional costs, they are puzzled by the modest expectations for any short run savings from consolidation, and hopeful for longer-term savings and efficiencies.

Partly because of recent revaluations and partly because they understand municipal debt to be comparable, they expect consolidation to have close to equal impact on taxes. When asked whether they would oppose consolidation if their own municipality suffered a 3% to 10% lower benefit than the other in taxes, all participants stopped to think. That said, some emphasized the future and remained pro consolidation. Others delayed any decision, awaiting a full and certain explanation of any disparity.

Additional Findings

Debt

Assuming that any Borough-Township debt discrepancy is 10% or less, residents say that assigning all debt to a consolidated municipality is more consistent with the direction they want their community to move.

Finances

One participant asked, “What could lead to a situation in which the Borough saw less benefit in taxes than the Township following consolidation?” One Borough participant mentioned a general tendency among some Borough residents to feel like financial victims of the Township. This suggestion appeared to resonate with some other participants, although it did not appear to be an accurate description of the particular participant who had been asking.

Municipal Buildings

At least one Borough participant expressed concern that a consolidated municipality would probably use the Township building as the governmental center. Assuming that the Commission recommends consolidation, it might do well to specify likely use of all buildings now in governmental use.

Governance and name for a consolidated municipality

Participants in one group said they wanted the Commission at least to consider the name “Princeton Borough” rather than “Princeton” as the name of any newly consolidated municipality. This discussion was brief and following the discussion on governance at least one person said that including “Borough” in the name would reference the form of governance. (Form of governance did NOT seem a major issue.) There was a current of disagreement from other participants, particularly those from the Township, possibly sensing unequal treatment.

Princeton University

Residents see a wide range of benefits from Princeton University, but are concerned that the University plays the two municipalities against each other for its own benefit. When asked what they value most about living in Princeton, individual participants in both focus groups specifically identified the benefits of living near the University. Participants generally believe, or at least hope, that a unified town with a unified voice might get what they see as a fairer deal. (The similarity of wording in participants’ comments suggests that this may be a recent attitude, related to issues with the Arts and Transit neighborhood.)

Schools

There was no discussion of the school budgets that account for half of property taxes, including praise for the schools where regionalization is believed to have worked well. We had not gathered to discuss the schools, and we did not discuss rankings of school districts on test scores, nor socio-demographics of school districts, or the claimed differential impact of regionalization on different parts of the Princeton

community. Schools appeared to be put forth as a model for consolidation at least as much because of their single overall administration as because of any other aspects.

Participants with school aged children were more vocal in their praise of schools than older participants, but all participants appeared to agree with the praise.

Shared services vs. consolidation

Sharing services is seen as a second choice to consolidation. The two municipalities have tried this, including assigning primary responsibility to a single municipality rather than splitting responsibilities between the two. Sharing may be preferable to not sharing, but full consolidation makes more sense to the focus group participants.

- Sharing police services is seen by some as likely to shake up both departments, which participants felt would be good in itself, and likely to lead to more efficient service, and greater convenience for all residents and organizations.

Participants do see that the two departments have somewhat complementary service calls (Borough police at night, Township by day).

- Participants see sharing public works as an issue of geographic more than bureaucratic efficiency, with improvement coming from having one department plow all streets, for instance.

Size

All participants value, or have come to value, the benefits of a small community. One said that while the current consolidation made sense to her, she was NOT interested in growing larger yet. She did not elaborate, but this appeared to stem from concern that consolidation be limited to the two Princetons, and not extended in the future to additional communities.

Wards/Districts

Wards/districts, for instance matching current municipal boundaries, make some sense to residents with respect to allocating debt if clearly different between the current municipalities, or perhaps with respect to political representation, but were not otherwise seen as valuable. With only one or two exceptions, participants had not thought much about them.

Appendix 1: Values mentioned by participants

These were generally named by one participant and then elaborated on by others. Most participants saw consolidation as enhancing these values, not as putting them at risk.

Sense of community

- Civic responsibility, with citizens who take action when warranted; volunteerism
- Sense that democracy works much of the time, that input is sought and voices are heard
- Public officials generally accessible, though more so in person or when known than over the telephone
- Cohesion of community, only rarely split by municipality

Diversity of residents in and attracted to Princeton

- Race/ethnicity
- Age
- Both new and long-time residents
- Variety of occupations
- Class/income (though seen as less diverse now than as remembered in the past)

Schools

Opportunities for children AND opportunities for senior citizens

Opportunities in small town setting, including:

- Lectures
- McCarter
- Princeton Art Museum
- Other, including education, sports, Princeton University

Public Library, including books and activities for all ages

A “walkable” downtown, with many merchants who know you though shops are increasingly upscale, less local

Open space and parks, combination of city and country, small town and cosmopolitan, with other desirable places nearby

Non-profits serving full community

Transportation/flexibility/convenience

- To New York City and Philadelphia, and also to other places nearby
- Around town and nearby
- Walk/bike everywhere

Beauty (generally and at street level), maintained by all, generally including public works

Safety, maintained by all, though some concern that police not pulling full weight

Appendix 2: Methodology

In the nature of qualitative research with a total of 24 participants, the findings in this report should be read cautiously, taken as exploratory and informative, NOT definitive.

Representativeness

Participants in the focus groups were recruited randomly using telephone landlines and voter lists by districts from both the Borough and the Township. Borough residents were recruited equally with Township residents. Probably because of the use of landlines and the white pages in recruiting, there were no participants aged 18-29, and no Princeton University students. Race/ethnicity varied, including white, south Asian, ~~east~~East Asian and Hispanic, but not Black. Employment and place of employment varied, with different participants mentioning employment in New York and locally and lack of paid employment, and at least one participant who was a retired member of the Princeton University faculty

Purpose and Methodology

Two focus groups were intended to:

- Explore the demographic and psychological aspects of support for, and opposition to, consolidation/shared services, both overall and especially in the areas of police, public works, municipal government, and taxes and debt
- Check that the primary issues uncovered in neighborhood/outreach meetings conducted by the Commission include those found in the more random groups.
- Participants were recruited from voter lists by district.
 - Random numbers together with the availability of a landline number in the telephone white pages determined the individuals to call within each district.
 - Availability and willingness to attend the session determined who was recruited.
 - One to two participants were recruited per district to ensure geographic coverage and roughly equal numbers of Borough and Township recruits.
 - Fourteen residents were recruited per group (assuming correctly that a few would cancel or fail to show).
- Twelve individuals participated in each group, and each lasted 1.5 hours, one on a Saturday morning and one on a Thursday evening.
- The moderator used the discussion guide attached as Appendix 4 in leading the groups.
- “Participant” refers specifically to one or more of the focus group participants. “Residents” refers to Princeton Borough or Township residents generally, whom the focus group participants were recruited to represent.

Appendix 3: Demographics

A total of 24 residents participated in the two focus groups, 12 in each.

Three participants have lived in both the Borough and the Township. Thirteen of the 24 total currently live in the Borough and eleven in the Township.

Many participants are long-term residents, whether of the Borough (maximum of 33 years) or of the Township (maximum of 51 years), but some are short-term residents (minimum of 9 months).

Six participants are aged 30 to 49, thirteen are aged 50 to 64, and five are 65 or older. (The complete absence of participants aged 18-29 probably reflects the recruiting process looking up land line numbers in the white pages.)

Eleven participants live in households with school aged children (aged 5-17). Nine live in households with seniors (themselves or others aged 65 or older).

Ten participants are male, and fourteen are female.

Appendix 4: Discussion Guide

(This is the guide used for the 4/14/2011- Thursday group. The guide for the 4/9 group differed primarily in the commission members present and in timing starting at 10:30 am rather than 7:30 pm.)

FILL IN NAME TAGS; GET TABLE POSITION ON "QUESTIONNAIRES" TO IDENTIFY INDIVIDUALS WITHOUT USING NAMES IN REPORT.

Please turn off cell phones and other electronic devices. Please fill out the questionnaire while we're waiting for others.

INTRODUCTIONS AND INITIAL SET OF EXPERIENCES (15 min, 7:30-7:45 PM)

Why we are here and what we hope to learn. Good evening. I'm Deborah Macmillan. I will be conducting this group. I have with me two members of the Commission on Consolidation and Shared Services. **Carol Golden** will be taking some notes, and **Anton Lahnston** will be writing summary notes on the board so we can all see them and refer back to them if we want to do so. Both Anton and Carol will provide input as appropriate.

We're here for what is called a "focus group" in order to discuss the concerns and opportunities that Princeton Borough and Princeton Township residents face as they consider whether to consolidate, share services that they are not now sharing, or continue operating more or less the way they are now. We are audio-taping this session in order to be sure we have exactly what you say, but we will not identify you by name with what you say in any report of this group. We do have two rules we have are that everyone speaks freely, and that everyone pays attention when others are speaking.

Names, descriptors etc. Now let's go around the table. Please tell us:

- your name so we're sure how to pronounce it
- and one thing that you really like about the Princeton community, whether it affects you or your family directly, indirectly, or you're just glad it's there and you would be disturbed if it were lost or changed markedly, and you might be pleased if it were enhanced.

GO AROUND THE ROOM GETTING VALUES, THEN:

Is it obvious who lives in the Borough, who lives in the Township, and who has lived in both? – GO AROUND ROOM AFTER GIVING PARTICIPANTS A MINUTE TO THINK ABOUT THIS, AND QUICKLY SAY WHETHER BOR OR TWP.

SUMMARIZE VALUES: (20 min, 7:45 - 8:05 PM)

Now let's see how much we agree and differ among ourselves on what we've said. I limited you to saying only one thing, but there may be additional things we decide to raise now.

I want to put aside for a few minutes the issue of how consolidation might enhance or endanger these things that we value. First, some of these things may be central to the Princetons as a whole. Others are either located in or more associated with or characteristic of the Borough or much more characteristic of the Township? Then, if so, do you think they are more valued by Borough residents of Township residents?

PARTICIPANTS RAISE CATEGORIES; ONLY POLICE/PUBLIC WORKS TO BE DISCUSSED AT LENGTH

ENHANCE/DANGER TO VALUES: (15 min, 8:05 -8:20 pm)

Now let's talk about consolidation and shared services directly and see if we agree on the values that may be enhanced or at risk due to consolidation or shared services. First, Anton/Carol will explain the timeline under which the consolidation/shared services commission is operating. June 22 recommendation to governing body, which must make a decision by August 25 about whether to put consolidation on the ballot for the Nov. 8 election.

Next, is there a way to do the consolidation or sharing of services that would enhance the service and minimize any risk?

FOR POLICE AND FOR PUBLIC WORKS: Can we rank the importance of these different concerns, at least into the categories of extremely important, important, and less important? (And now can we agree on the most important items?)

TAXES/DEBT: (20 min, 8:20-8:40 PM)

Municipal budgets account for only a quarter of your property taxes. For this reason and because many cost cutting actions have already been taken, consolidation of the two municipalities is likely to result in fairly small savings in local property taxes. It may however, hold off some major increases in the future and consolidation now may be less costly now than in the future, for instance if the two municipalities take different directions on something such as information systems. Assume for now that an individual's taxes overall will be steady or slightly lower if the municipalities consolidate or share major service like police or public works. Assume also that allocation of fees for services will be simpler and probably fairer if there is one municipality rather than two.

What issues do you have with taxes as they are related to consolidation? Please be brief but specific, not just that they're higher than you would like.

Debt can be allocated according to which community incurred it, or it can be allocated to the community as a whole, for instance because while debt can be measured precisely, assets are much harder to measure. What issues do you have with debt allocation as related to consolidation?

Now assume that for whatever reason debt or taxes or both are best allocated somewhat unevenly, and that it is **your** municipality that benefits less financially. Assuming that consolidation of the two municipalities goes smoothly with respect to other issues such as municipal services, how do you feel about an uneven allocation? **Will an uneven allocation of tax savings or of debt affect your decision to vote for/against consolidation?**

FORM OF GOVERNMENT (IF NOT ALREADY RAISED/DISCUSSED): (10 min, 8:40 – 8:50 PM)

The Borough and the Townships have different forms of government.

- *Borough residents elect both their Mayor and their six Council members directly. The Mayor serves a 4 year term and the Council members serve 3 year terms.*
- *Township residents elect five Township Committee members directly. The Committee members then elect a Mayor and Deputy Mayor from amongst themselves. The Mayor and Deputy Mayor*

serve one year terms in these positions, but serve three year terms as Committee members.

There are other differences, but one major similarity: both Borough and Township elections are held at large, not by wards, which you may be familiar with in Trenton and some other places, for instance.

Did you know the form of government before you moved to where you live now? Was it part of the reason you moved there?

For a number of reasons, the Commission on Consolidation/Shared Services has decided that the Borough form of government has fewer problems under consolidation. As a result, if it recommends consolidation, it expects to recommend the Borough form of government, with a directly elected mayor.

Do you have any comments on this decision? Concerns? Will it affect your decision to vote for/against consolidation? (same question of wards if raised)

CLOSING: (10 min, 8:50 – 9 PM)

ISSUES COMMISSION OBSERVERS WANT TO RAISE/EXPLORE FURTHER:

Schedule going forward – to be said by a commissioner!

Remainder of the consolidation/shared service calendar, going forward into 2012

What will be known once recommendations are made and vote, if any, is taken.


THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!

Appendix 5: Demographic/support questions


This sheet was distributed and completed at the start of each focus group.

Please circle the response that best applies, and fill in the blanks.


1. Live now:
 - a. Princeton Borough
 - b. Princeton Township
2. Gender:
 - a. Male
 - b. female
3. Age:
 - a. 18-29
 - b. 30-49
 - c. 50-64
 - d. 65 or more
4. Number of people in your household: _____ (including yourself)
5. Number of person age 65 or older: _____ (including yourself if appropriate)
6. Number of persons age 5 to 17: _____
7. How many years in total have you lived in the Borough (whether or not you live there now)? _____
8. How many years in total have you lived in the Township (whether or not you live there now)? _____
9. Please consider the possible consolidation of Princeton Borough and Princeton Township into a single municipality, which of the following best describes your position at this time:
 - a. Support consolidation
 - b. Neutral because haven't thought much about it
 - c. Neutral because haven't decided
 - d. Oppose

 IF NEUTRAL, which way are you leaning?

 - a. Support,
 - b. Really can't say, or
 - c. Oppose?
10. Now suppose that consolidation of the municipalities turns out not to be an option for whatever reason, which of the following best describes your position at this time regarding the possible sharing of a single Public Works Department:
 - a. Support sharing Public Works
 - b. Neutral because haven't thought much about it
 - c. Neutral because haven't decided
 - d. Oppose

 IF NEUTRAL, which way are you leaning?

 - a. Support,
 - b. Really can't say, or
 - c. Oppose?
11. And finally, still supposing that consolidation turns out not to be an option, which of the following best describes your position at this time regarding the possible sharing of a single Police Department:
 - a. Support sharing Police
 - b. Neutral because haven't thought much about it
 - c. Neutral because haven't decided
 - d. Oppose

 IF NEUTRAL, which way are you leaning?

 - a. Support,
 - b. Really can't say, or
 - c. Oppose?