

Forced merger bills a slap in face of founding fathers

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Today, as a township or borough resident, you can go to a municipal meeting, speak out about what's right and wrong, and have a real and lasting impact on what happens in your community.

Tomorrow, however, that might not be the case. And the sad thing is, many Pennsylvanians aren't aware that something they value, and possibly take for granted, could be snatched away. And that's their right to be heard, loud and clear, by their local elected leaders.

As I write, state lawmakers are preparing to hold hearings on two serious threats to our democratic way of life, House Bill 2431 and Senate Bill 1357, which would radically reshape our commonwealth by snuffing out townships and boroughs.

The most onerous measure, House Bill 2431, is nothing short of a slap in the face to our founding fathers. Proposed by Rep. Thomas Caltagirone of Berks County, the bill would make Pennsylvania's community-based system of governing unconstitutional — unconstitu-

tional! — and replace it with something he says is better: an out-of-sight mega-bureaucracy overseen by the county.

In protest, supervisors in hundreds of townships have rallied and passed resolutions that oppose the bills.

Despite this grassroots uprising — isn't that what America is all about? — Caltagirone and his fellow "do-gooders" continue to stand firm on their bigger-is-better platform, a house of cards built on whimsy, not fact, and claim they know what is best for Pennsylvania.

Their argument hinges on the debatable premise that the commonwealth should follow the lead of a handful of other states, bulldoze its patchwork of "inefficient" and "redundant" municipalities, and create a landscape of bigger, supposedly more efficient governments.

But we don't have to look beyond our borders for examples of the bigger-government model. We've got them right here in Pennsylvania. Look at places like Philadelphia, Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, Reading, and Allentown. They're larger, for sure, but are they more efficient? More responsive? More affordable?

Guest column

Not by a long shot.

But if you're searching for an example of a better-government model, look no farther than the nearest township. There, you'll find hardworking, fiscally responsible men and women who work together, do more with less, and are frugal with tax dollars. They're also deeply committed to preserving Pennsylvania's long-standing tradition of government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" in an age where big boxes (think Home Depot) rule.

But are big boxes the solution? Maybe for grocery stores and discount retailers, but not for government, where hands-on, within-reach leadership — the vision of William Penn and our nation's founding fathers — still makes as much sense today as it did hundreds of years ago.

Of course, critics will say that township supervisors are protesting the likes of House Bill 2431 because they want to preserve their jobs and power. But self-preservation is not their motivation.

Townships, instead, are de-

termined to protect something they know their residents hold sacred, and that's their fundamental right to govern themselves locally.

Why, I ask, would anyone want it any other way?

Author's note: If you value grassroots governing, please call or e-mail your state representatives and senators and voice your opposition to House Bill 2431 and Senate Bill 1357. Lawmakers want — and need — to hear from their voters. Therefore, the more voices that protest this legislation, the better the chances of protecting and preserving Pennsylvania's local governments along with the township way of life for many years to come.

David M. Sanko is the executive director of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors. With a broad background in local and state government, Sanko oversees an organization that is the primary advocate for the commonwealth's 1,455 townships of the second class, home to 5.4 million Pennsylvanians.