

OUR VIEW

Whitestown, N.H. sharing can be model

**AT ISSUE: Sharing services
can be bonus for municipalities**

An agreement between the towns of Whitestown and New Hartford to share a financial officer could be a model for other towns and villages across the county, and could result in tax savings and closer monitoring of municipal finances.

The plan, announced Tuesday, is unique to Oneida County. Under the arrangement, the financial officer will be an employee of the county, but will be dedicated exclusively to the towns of New Hartford and Whitestown, which will pay salary and benefits.

County Comptroller Joseph Timpano helped arrange the deal after leaders in both municipalities said that town growth and increasingly complex budgets created a need for greater fiscal oversight. Both were planning to hire part-time comptrollers, but decided that sharing the job could be mutually beneficial.

This is one way to reduce layers of government and is actually being encouraged by the state as part of an effort to reduce the local property tax burden. Municipalities that embrace consolidation and shared services can be eligible for funding of up to \$200,000 through the Shared Municipal Services Incentive (SMSI) Program to help initiate the effort. Timpano said that state

funding is being sought.

Beyond the possible tax savings, better financial control can result from professional oversight. As leaders in the two cooperating towns observed, budgets are growing more complex, running into hundreds of thousands of dollars, often placing tremendous fiscal responsibility in the hands of people not trained in accounting or finance.

State audits routinely point out weaknesses in the way small governments oversee taxpayer money - problems we've seen right here in Oneida County.

Just last year, the former Vienna town clerk was convicted of stealing more than \$400,000. And in Annsville, the town supervisor admitted he made errors in how he handled funds due to the Internal Revenue Service.

Tapping a professional to handle fiscal duties only makes sense, and sharing that service is even better.

Hopefully, this is just the beginning. With 49 chief executives, 227 lawmakers, 13 police departments, and 15 school districts in Oneida County alone, there are certainly other opportunities for consolidation or, at the very least, shared services. Leaders must look for them, and taxpayers should insist that they do.