

SBC Docket#11-C-1  
Proposed Consolidation  
of the City of Saugatuck, City of the Village of Douglas  
and Saugatuck Township Allegan County

## **Questionnaire for Consolidation 191 PA 1968**

### Questionnaire

#### **1. a) Why is consolidation necessary or desirable at this time?**

The three small jurisdictions are contiguous to one another and govern one resort-oriented community. The area has never recovered from the recession of 2008-2009 and needs to look to the future as it faces a deteriorated harbor, uneven availability of modern infrastructure such as internet service, and an aging population. There is no better time than the present to reduce the overhead that accompanies three separate governments for a population of 5,151, as measured by the 2010 U.S. Census, who inhabit one community. Cost savings from merging three governments could offer tax relief to fixed income property taxpayers, investment in needed infrastructure, such as harbor improvement, or a combination of both.

Consolidation has been recommended by three separate, independent studies conducted over a period of 22 years by two distinct academic institutions and world-renown municipal financial advisory company. In that two decade span, the community's voters have never been given the opportunity to exercise their prerogative on the matter. At a time when the three existing governments face or can expect to face increasing cost and reduced revenue pressures, the question must be asked, if not now, when? If the current Boundary Commission chooses not to send this issue to area's voters, which one will?

#### **b) Have you reviewed other alternatives that might accomplish your goals?**

The area has already consolidated among all its jurisdictions taxpayer supported fire, library, and bus services. In addition, a rate payer supported water and sewer authority provides service to both cities and a portion of the township. A joint police service is supported by the two cities' taxpayers, though this agency does respond to calls in the township without the promise of compensation.

In summary, the aforementioned individual services have been consolidated and operated well. The remaining cost centers of local government would be unwieldy to consolidate as distinct services and the full measure of efficient

management and decision-making would not be achieved without a full consolidation of local government.

**c) What are these alternatives?**

None.

**d) Why were they rejected?**

No alternatives to consolidation have been suggested other than to continue the costly and inefficient *status quo*.

**2. a) If consolidation is accomplished, will the existing land use change?**

None have been forecast as a result of consolidation. Both cities are extensively developed as are large tracts of the township. No change in zoning is anticipated as a result of a consolidation vote.

**b) If yes, how will it change?**

Not applicable.

**c) How soon can this change be expected?**

Not applicable.

**3. At this time, what governmental services are provided to the area proposed for consolidation?**

The common services individually provided by each government include the registration and maintenance of voter files and the conduct of elections; assessment of taxes and collection thereof; zoning; general representative government.

The two cities also provide park and recreation services, road and street maintenance and plowing; trash pick-up in the shopping areas of each city, and police services. The township provides for cemeteries and their maintenance. The three jurisdictions have created independent authorities to furnish fire services, bus transportation, and a district library. As mentioned, the three also participate in a water and sewer utility supported by customers.

**4. a) What new or additional government services do you expect to be made available if the land is consolidated?**

Police services could be extended to the township at the very time the Allegan County Sheriff's department is withdrawing services because of reduced funding. Critical harbor maintenance could be undertaken to restore the vitality of Allegan County's only working harbor. The harbor at one time could accommodate 2,000 craft; in 2011 only 800 boats could find enough water to support activities. This reduced access to navigable water diminishes economic activity in a key Great Lake State recreational

harbor and pulls down job growth. The community could see new opportunity with the development of consistent goals that would include an economic development and jobs plan that currently doesn't exist because of the divergent outlooks of the three governments. Uneven internet service could be eliminated with the creation of a universal WIFI that allows residents and visitors access to the World Wide Web. Decision-making vital to the future of the community could be accelerated without the extended and unnecessarily complex round robin of three governments of 19 elected officials choked in extended debate.

**b) If consolidation were approved, what would be the impact on the city, township and the greater community?**

For the two cities, the primary impact would be the elimination of costly duplication of municipal management, the delivery of public works services without boundary issues and the improved attractiveness of key municipal positions when they become open. Dismissive scenes such as Saugatuck's snowplow retracting its blade when it crosses into Douglas in order to reach a separate section of Saugatuck would be eliminated. For the township, the immediate impact would be the availability of police services without restraint, close-at-hand road maintenance and snowplowing from a DPW garage already located within the township, though owned by Saugatuck city, rather than through the county garage located 15 miles distant in Fennville.

For the entire area, the impact would be one government to plan and execute the future of a community that often loses its brightest and best and misses new investment opportunities because of the inability of three governments to agree on a future by choice. Middle income residents could once again afford to live in a reduced tax haven made possible by the elimination of at least \$500,000 in annual, unnecessary overhead. The prospect of pricing blue collar workers out of the area could be ameliorated with the savings earned through elimination of redundant government.

**c) If consolidation were denied, what would be the impact on the community?**

It is likely the harbor would continue its long decline as the three existing governments, despite four years of discussion, do not all participate in the harbor authority created by the two cities. This issue is key to the entire community's economic health as the harbor's existence incites economic activity which in turn creates jobs. Other impacts include the continued high cost of living in the three jurisdictions, further driving middle income families from the community. Saugatuck Douglas community taxpayers would continue to pay \$500,000 more each year than taxpayers in 11 other comparable Michigan communities. Historic quarrels among the three governments would continue as the larger community sits at idle.

Finally, if the SBC denies consolidation, voters, who have long been denied the opportunity to exercise their will on the matter, will continue to be frustrated by those elected and appointed to serve them.