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# Delivering the Biggest Tax Cut in Bergen

In Montvale, shared services and an emphasis on business are paying off

By Roger Fyfe, Mayor, Borough of Montvale



**M**any Bergen County boroughs were developed during the same era. Hence, we share many of the same problems today--aging infrastructure, effects of evolving development, lower revenue and higher taxes. Some of us have been running our services the same way for so long, it's difficult to see the forest for the trees.

In Montvale, we are discovering that the solution could be as easy as taking a proactive stance on shared services and revenue development.

**Shared services** One area we have found for savings is shared services. Many municipalities are exploring these opportunities because it just makes sense. However, in order for this to work successfully, municipal governments have to lay down their bi-partisan swords and foster a culture of cooperation and communication.

Through regular meetings with our neighbors, Montvale officials have been sharing knowledge, problems and solutions. As a result of communications with River Vale Mayor Joe Blundo, the Pascack Valley DPW was created to share public works services and equipment between River Vale and Montvale. In addition, Montvale, Park Ridge and Woodcliff Lake formed the first joint court system in the county. We have also been sharing the Tri-Boro Ambulance and the first joint emergency dispatch center in New Jersey for over 70 years.

After we combined our recycling drop-off center with River Vale, the facility's hours have been extended. As a result, more residents are dropping off material for recycling. The efficiency created by this consolidation is enabling us to increase other services at a lesser cost.

This isn't to say that there haven't been a few hiccups along the way. Our new DPW was tested immediately by the worst winter in decades. Yet, with each storm we learned a little more about how to improve. We are planning to use the savings we've realized through our joint DPW program to fund an aggressive road paving program.

enabled them to grow their facility to encompass five buildings. While the zoning for this corporate space worked initially, today's workplaces are designed to accommodate more people per square foot. The result was that Mercedes-Benz had too little parking. With Maser Consulting's help and a little zoning rearrangement, we made this footprint

work better by reducing their frontage to provide more parking and landscaped it to appear more like one campus.

Another opportunity we were able to seize was the conversion of an old office building into an extremely popular, state-of-the-art Lifetime Athletic fitness center. A parcel that was bringing in no tax revenue is now a \$60 million ratable.

Between shared services and new revenue streams, Montvale is saving an estimated \$850,000 annually.

**Recruiting ratables** Historically, Montvale has maintained a business-friendly reputation. When I came into office in 2008, we found that our wealth of commercial space was not being used to its maximum benefit. The revenue from the commercial properties was down, taxes were rising and we had a low surplus. We knew we needed to shift the balance of ratables to ease the burden on homeowners by proactively generating revenue from corporate tenants.

So we and formed a team to change the situation that included myself, Borough Planning Board Chairman John DePinto, Borough Engineer Andrew Hipolit (Maser Consulting P.A.), Borough Planner Richard Preiss (Phillips Preiss Grygiel), and Planning Board Attorney Robert Regan. Our first step was to take a fresh look at Montvale's assets and to revise our master plan. This process went more smoothly thanks to a decision to combine our planning and zoning boards into a one-stop land use board.

One long-time tenant, Mercedes-Benz was able to make some changes that

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## Biggest Tax Cut in Bergen



Montvale Mayor Roger Fyfe poses in front of the new Lifetime Athletic fitness center. Town leaders helped to facilitate the transition of an old office building, which generated no tax revenue, into a state-of-the-art facility that is now a \$60 million ratable.

In addition, a former farm property is slated to be anchored by a 140,000 square foot Wegmans with 100,000 square feet of additional retail space. We expect the space to attract high-end eateries to serve our corporate base and specialty retail clients. This under-valued farm land has turned into a commercial project that will create well over \$100 million in ratables. Revenue from these

two properties will greatly contribute to much needed traffic improvements.

**Dollars and sense** Public buy-in was slow at first. But once residents saw what we had accomplished, this changed. Between shared services and new revenue streams, Montvale is saving an estimated \$850,000 annually. According to an article in *The Record* (March 20, 2014), out of 70 towns in Bergen

County only five had tax decreases, two of them were significant, and Montvale had the largest decrease (approximately \$499/household) more than double of runner-up Saddle Brook (\$237). This is a significant number and a direct result of some of the changes we made.

**Future** Another way we are using existing resources is by seeking grants beyond the usual county and state grants. For instance, Maser Consulting, our engineers, helped us submit an application to FEMA for an Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program that we may never have found. We hope to use funding from this nationwide grant program to help purchase a combined rescue pumper vehicle and to provide mutual aid for surrounding towns. We also have grant applications in progress that will help us address our aging sanitary sewer infrastructure. We currently make approximately \$30,000 annually by leasing a cell tower on Montvale property. New ideas present themselves all the time—you just have to be creative and receptive to innovation.

**Keeping costs in-line** To provide our communities with the services they need is becoming increasingly more difficult. Innovative thinking and taking that fresh look at our existing resources has changed the way Montvale is running its community services. We've found that savings can be uncovered when we step back and adjust our perspective. In Montvale a little ingenuity and municipal cooperation have gone a long way. ♣

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**Top Bergen County 2013 Tax Decreases**

Montvale	-\$499
Saddle Brook	-\$237
New Milford	-\$119
Moonachie	-\$56
Saddle River	-\$24