

OUR VIEW

## UNITY DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN MERGER

A merging of Mankato and North Mankato is not a new idea. It's been raised several times during the past three decades — always rejected out of hand by North Mankato.

But in an atmosphere of rising property taxes, reduced services, less state aid and more competition among cities, a new study looking at merger benefits deserves serious attention.

The study was commissioned by Mankato City Manager Pat Hentges.

The report shows a merged city would save residents about \$2.2 million a year.

North Mankato residents will be interested in the potential property-tax savings of a merger. The owner of a \$165,000 North Mankato home pays \$133 a year more in city property tax than if the same home were in Mankato.

The study suggests a merger would lower an average North Mankato home tax bill by \$227 and a Mankato homeowner's tax bill by \$74.

Even if a full merger doesn't happen, residents and officials in both communities need to use the opportunity to find more and better ways to share services, corroborate and be more efficient.

Those haven't always been the hallmark of the cities' relationship in recent years. North Mankato recently dropped out of Greater Mankato Growth — an economic development and visitors group — saying it could get more bang for its buck by going it alone. Ironically, not long after, several other area communities and Blue Earth and Nicollet counties chose to join GMG, recognizing the benefits of a unified approach to economic development is a state where cities are jockeying for money and influence. Creating a unified identity — be it a merged city or not — is especially important now that the greater MankatoNorth Mankato area is now designated as a federal metropolitan statistical area. It's a designation that can bring added financial assistance, more businesses and other opportunities. But those opportunities will be diminished if turf wars preclude cooperation.

Residents on both sides of the river have good reason to be proud of their community. That doesn't mean things can't be done better or differently.

For years, the discussion has been devoid of concrete data on what a merger could mean. Now if these numbers cannot be refuted and taxpayers and businesses can, in fact, save money from a merger, what is keeping North Mankato from the discussion table?