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Liberty investigating home rule

Administrator to meet with officials of other townships

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LIBERTY TOWNSHIP — Liberty Township officials will meet again March 20 to discuss the pros and cons of adopting limited home rule.

In the meantime, Liberty Township Administrator Dina Minnici is conducting field research. Since a Feb. 8 work session exploring limited home rule, Minnici has met with officials from West Chester and Fairfield townships, which both have home rule.

In the week to come, she plans to meet with officials from Colerain, Union and Batavia townships, the latter of which opted for home rule in 2005.

"We're just taking in how each of those entities has used home rule to help benefit the township," Minnici said.

Limited home rule would enable Liberty Township to enact legislation in a broad range of areas that it cannot do as a statutory township. It could mean some independence from Butler County when it comes to funding various infrastructure projects.

One of the biggest benefits would be the ability to issue debt, which could help fund the \$30 million to \$50 million Liberty

Interchange, Minnici said.

Home rule could also translate into a higher bond rating, meaning lower debt costs and the ability to combine different debt obligations under a general bond, she said.

"Investors can have a little more confidence in the township," Minnici said. "It gives us a stronger standing in the bond market."

But under home rule, the township would be required to hire a full- or part-time law director, a move listed as a disadvantage by the township.

Last year, the township incurred about \$125,000 in legal fees, part of which went to a private lawyer who helped the township navigate a Joint Economic Development

District with Middletown and Mason. That doesn't mean the township would necessarily need such an option in the years to come.

"You can't really take last year's costs as a realistic estimate," Minnici said, noting that "routine" township issues are handled free of charge through the Butler County Prosecutor's Office.

Limited home rule also means the ability to enact a wide variety of permissible legislation, but Minnici said that wasn't the township's focus.

"We're not looking at this as a way to have more government restrictions. We're looking at this as a way for the township to have more flexibility and improve the township's infrastructure," she said.

Home rule would also give the township the authority to hire an independent engineer to work on roadway projects in the township with the approval of the county engineer. Butler County Commissioner Michael Fox said adopted home rule would be a valuable asset for Liberty Township.

"It's something that personally I think doesn't carry any negatives and picks up a lot of positives," Fox said. "Adopting the home rule provision gives the township government far more flexibility in serving the needs of their residents than the traditional township form of government does."

JournalNews reporter Ken-Von Hardy contributed to this report.