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Sharon Schulman / Curbing corruption means unpopular choices

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New Jersey has become great fodder for talk show hosts and comedians when it comes to

take to lessen the problem. But the numbers belie the Post-Tribune's claim that our state is really bad. It's not. It's just that we have more than 500 municipalities, which makes it difficult to

control corruption in every one of them.

U.S. Census Bureau figures show that New Jersey's population grew by only 1.1 percent over the last decade, from 8,600,000 to 8,680,000.

The bottom 20 percent of states grew with 1.8 percent and lower than New Jersey.

How did we get this reputation? Quite simply, we sit in the middle of two

media markets competing for viewership, readership and advertising dollars: N.Y. and

Philadelphia. If you do not live in New Jersey, you get your news - and image of what happens

here - via television, radio and newspapers from two competing areas. And most certainly, the bad

news gets the attention of the audience better than the good news.

But the truth is that we are not so bad. We also have to face as much as 60 percent of the United

States is less corrupt than we are, and that fact needs our attention. Tammany Hall-era power

broker G.W. Blenkitt could not tell the difference between honest and dishonest.

grant. This honest grant was discriminating everyday working people. Honest grant was finding opportunities to make money and take it. To date, both areas are terrible. Yuck.

We still insist on being a state that creates fear for the future.

New Jersey houses 566 municipalities, 40 legislative districts, 21 county governments, and

hundreds upon hundreds of state, county and local special purpose governments. Special purpose

governments include 605 school districts, as well as municipal and county utility and

protection and transportation, economic development and improvement authorities and districts.

purpose governments have taxing, bonding and purchasing authority outside the control of the municipality or county.

New Jersey has taken the first step. "Conflicts" are defined in the state constitution as "any government. There are just too many people involved in too many governmental and quasi-governmental bodies and stumbling on too many opportunities to make a quick dollar. To be sure, most people are involved as concerned citizens willing to take on extra duties on public service

through land deals, purchasing contracts and outright payoffs is too large to accept."

Of equal concern is that of most New Jerseyans is the lack of time. This is a major Republican problem. It is time - and here I am not referring to time as in time to go to trial for crimes. We have to change the way we govern ourselves. Below are ideas to be explored that require hard - sometimes unpopular - choices and radical thinking.

n Increase the boundaries of what we define as the area for home rule by merging towns, townships, villages and some cities. The elected officials should be full-time with the boundaries

n Decrease 605 school districts to 21 county districts with full-time management. With the right makeup of administrators, rural, suburban and urban needs can be addressed.

n Many special interests are involved in politics. They are not there to serve the public interest.

the decision you make at the polls as you vote.

n Make New Jersey's legislators full time with full-time work and unable to accept outside employment and honoraria. This reduces both the appearance and the reality of conflicts. They already receive the benefits of full-time employees, so this is a salary adjustment only. This may increase taxes in the short run, but the savings in potential conflicts and the damage to our reputation.

And these ideas only represent cutting corruption. For example, if we can't get rid of the political parties, see the opportunities for cost-cutting in government and vitality in our economy and commerce.

Corruption corrupts not only eats away at the public's confidence in our officials, it also damages the democratic process we value so much.