

# OBSERVER-DISPATCH

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## COUNTY

# Time running out for Prospect

**Staff Reporter** Observer-Dispatch

Published 5:00 a.m. ET Dec. 9, 2015 | Updated 7:03 a.m. ET Dec. 9, 2015

As the year comes to an end, so will the village of Prospect.

The 291-person village will dissolve Dec. 31, a decision that was made after two workers compensation claims resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars owed by the village.

“What the village has been doing is selling our assets so that the burden isn’t passed onto our taxpayers,” said Prospect Mayor Fran Righi.

In 2008 and 2013, the village was presented with workers comp claims from two members of the village’s former volunteer fire department. It currently owes about \$577,000 on the claims, but with one still outstanding, it’s unclear what the final number will be.

“Another medical procedure was recently approved for that comp patient, and we don’t know what that will cost yet,” Righi said.

Faced with the two claims and subsequent increasing premiums through the Oneida County Self-Insurance Plan that the village couldn’t afford, its option were to switch to another carrier or dissolve.

With only six months allowed to pay for the debt after leaving the plan, the village put the decision to a public vote in July.

“It was overwhelmingly in favor of the dissolving because of the workers comp debt,” said Marcia Ellis, clerk and treasurer. “There’s no way we could have come up with \$500,000 in six months.”

The village now has 20 years to pay off the debt, and although it will become a hamlet of the town of Trenton, only the 129 current property taxpayers in Prospect will be responsible for the payments.

“Our county Legislature worked very hard to get the Oneida County Self-Insurance Plan and the legislators to change the local law so that instead of Prospect having to pay this money back within six months of leaving the plan, we now have 20 years to pay it back,” Righi said.

Pat Robinson, a Prospect resident for 37 years, said she voted in favor of the dissolution because she didn’t think the village had much of a choice.

“It’s disappointing,” she said. “It’s really a lovely, small village. (But) I think it will be fine.”

To help offset the debt, the village already has sold its library, ambulance hall and fire hall. A potential buyer was visiting the municipal building Monday.

“We’ve sold property; we’re selling just about anything we can,” Ellis said.

The village is trying to have sales completed by Dec. 31, but Ellis said that if proceeds from sales are received after Jan. 1, the town of Trenton will earmark them to be used for the debt repayment.

In August 2014, the village shut down its volunteer fire department to help pay the workers comp debt. It has since received fire services from the Trenton Joint Fire District. Police services are provided by the county sheriff’s office and state troopers.

The town of Trenton will take care of services such as maintenance and plowing roads, Ellis said, and the village water department will become a water district within the town of Trenton.

“It’s going really fast, and everything’s gotten pretty crazy,” Righi said.

Matt Schram, 27, grew up in Prospect. He moved to Alaska years ago for work, but he returns home to visit his parents for the holidays.

“It’s sad,” he said. “My grandmother was on the board. I know that was definitely a tough financial decision, but a necessary one.”

What really “hit home,” he said, was the removal of the village of Prospect sign that stood just down the street from his house.

“It’s kind of a little loss of identity,” he said.

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