



Following dissolution, village largely unlamented



PORT HENRY | It's been a little over a year since the dissolution of the Village of Port Henry, and for the most part life has gone on with little change.

Taxes are a little lower as promised, but whether it will be enough to generate interest in new downtown businesses — as was also promised — the jury is still out.

“I haven’t heard one word of complaint (about the dissolution)” said Susan McHone, owner of Port Gifts and Arts on Broad Street. “On the other hand, I haven’t heard one word of praise, either.”

McHone said that tax reduction has been meaningful, and life for a business person is simpler, with one fewer government to go through. But she said village, or former village, still has work to do to become more economically viable.



The reduction in taxes, to take one example, wasn’t enough of a boost to save Barber Cooke Insurance. Ten years ago, Gary Cooke sold insurance in the village of Port Henry, and also served as its mayor. Today, Port Henry is no longer a village and last week Cooke and his wife Sharon left Port Henry and consolidated their insurance business in Ticonderoga.

The vote to dissolve the village two years ago was intended to save taxes and spur the local economy. But benefits didn’t come fast enough for Cooke, who moved to Port Henry in 2004 with the hope that New York was going to become another Vermont. He thought the growth he’d seen in places like Middlebury might translate to the lakeside towns in southern Essex County.

Cooke said he's seen some of that in Ticonderoga, but not in Port Henry. "From 2004 to 2007 (business) wasn't bad, but it's been in decline ever since," he said. "There's no money here."

Town Councilor Matt Brassard said the dissolution lowered taxes, but he's not sure that will be enough to fire economic growth. Some businesses have moved in, such as the popular Red Brick Cafe, but he said there's been nothing conclusive.

Brassard said Port Henry faces bigger issues, such as a lack of commercial land, and a rail line that separates the town from what could be its most valuable resource — Lake Champlain.



When the village dissolved, Brassard said his personal tax bill dropped by about \$70 a month. That's meaningful for a senior citizen who has to scrape bottom just to buy heating oil, but it isn't exactly enough to make business hearts flutter.

"If \$1,500 to \$2,000 a year is preventing you from opening a business, maybe opening a business isn't such a good idea," he said.

Don Foote, owner of a popular downtown diner, agreed the taxes have not been an economic determinant, and that what goes down must come up.

“Lower taxes — have you ever known that to happen?” he said.

Moriah Chamber of Commerce event coordinator and former president Catherine Sprague tried to keep the organization neutral during the dissolution fight, which even split some families. She believes dissolving the village was the right thing to do, but agrees that a downtown revitalization has been slow in coming.

Still, she said, it's early in the process and she's seen investors begin to nose around the town's iconic architecture. “There are people moving in and they have money,” she said.



For Cooke, it wasn't soon enough. Cooke does not lack for roots — his great, great grandfather sunk one of the region's first mine shafts — and he still believes that Port Henry might one day make a comeback. But for his insurance company it became a simple matter of business.

“Life is straightforward to a farm boy,” said Cooke, a former large animal vet. “If it doesn't work, you get out.” ■

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