

**NEWS**

# Town of Hastings to be dissolved

**Sheldon Gardner**

Published 10:01 p.m. ET Nov. 7, 2017

By the end of February, the town government of Hastings will be dissolved.

Hastings residents voted overwhelmingly Tuesday to dismantle their town government and revoke its charter. More than 82 percent of votes, 136, were in favor, while 29 people cast votes against the proposal, according to the St. Johns County Supervisor of Elections.

“I’m OK with it. ... I kind of pictured it rolling this way,” Mayor Tom Ward said Tuesday night.

The vote comes about a year after town commissioners voted to study what dissolution would look like, a move that came amid concerns from residents about water rates and the financial stability of the town.

The tiny town in southwestern St. Johns County was founded in 1890 and incorporated in 1909, according to the town’s website. Also known as the “Potato Capital of Florida” for its surroundings, the town’s population was 604 in 2015, according to the site.

Of the 402 registered voters in Hastings, more than 160, or about 41 percent, cast a vote on Tuesday.

The Town Commission will have to adopt a dissolution plan in January. The charter will be revoked on Feb. 28 along with any taxes, fees or charges created by the town as well as its ordinances.

St. Johns County will assume the town’s assets, utility system and its liabilities, and the town will become an unincorporated part of St. Johns County like Ponte Vedra Beach or Elkton. The process is guided by state law.

In September, county commissioners supported absorbing the town’s employees and decided not to implement a special taxing district or utility surcharge to defray the cost of taking over

management of the town. St. Johns County has also let town officials and residents know that water rates are expected be lower than those currently in place.

Ward said he believes it's a good business decision for town to dissolve, though he says "time will tell" if the county will maintain the former Hastings High School community building, where the commission meets and where town offices are located. Still, he said the county has resources to improve the town's sewer system.

Ward also said he doesn't expect big changes in his own life once he's no longer mayor, a post he estimated he's held for about 20 years.

"Life will go on the same," he said. "I'll be there for the parades and get-togethers — whatever I can do to help," he said.

On Tuesday, Hastings residents also voted to retain Commissioner Kim Lewis Felder on seat 3 of the town commission. The vote was 83 to 75 in favor of Lewis Felder over Chris Stanton.

Several people only voted on the dissolution issue.

Stanton, a fourth-generation resident, has raised concerns about the town's finances and suggested commissioners let voters decide whether to dissolve the town.

Hastings commissioners voted in December to study what dissolution would look like, and commissioners voted in August to put the question on a ballot.

"I'm happy that the residents of Hastings were given to the opportunity to decide how they wanted their hometown governed in the future," Stanton said, adding that he commended town commissioners for having the courage to place the issue on a ballot.

Lewis Felder could not be reached for comment.

Two other commission races were decided before Tuesday night. Chris Coleman won because he was unopposed, and Ward's opposition withdrew.

County and Hastings officials have said, or indicated, that Hastings will keep its identity.

"Dissolution does not mean that Hastings will disappear off the map," Stanton said. "I look at this outcome as just a small step in helping the community to move forward. There is much heavy lifting to be done."