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NEWS

Hartford back in business, but dissolution try still stings

ANDREW KING, ThisWeek Community News

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With an overwhelming 133-19 vote, Hartford residents rejected a measure to dissolve the village, guaranteeing Hartford would remain for the time being.

The issue was on the ballot as a result of five residents circulating a petition last October to ask their neighbors to place a referendum on the ballot to dissolve the village. At the time, 91 people signed, easily surpassing the 64 required valid signatures.

But just because voters want to keep the village intact, that doesn't mean business simply picks up where it left off.

Village leaders now have to make up for lost time, according to village administrator Gary Burkholder. The village had to forgo more than \$25,000 in grant funding while waiting on the vote outcome, he said. Once the petition was filed, the village was prohibited from taking on additional liability, he said, so the grants expired.

"Now we get back into the projects that were kind of frozen in time," Burkholder said.

About \$250,000 in grant funding for a \$341,000 road reconstruction project on Main Street remains, he said, but the village still is behind.

Burkholder said local-government-funding cuts from the state level has crippled the village. Without an income tax, he said, Hartford is struggling even to keep its streetlights on, having turned half of the lights off.

"If you have them all on, it's about \$8,000-\$9,000 a year," he said, "and that money has to come from the general fund."

The village failed to pass either a property-tax levy or an income tax in two previous elections and is now searching for funding, he said.

Hartford staff members are trying to sell the village's community center, which was losing money and has been closed. Although it's not the entire funding the village needs, it could help for the immediate future, Burkholder said.

"We've tried a property levy and tried an income tax, and those will be things that will be on the table again, but there's nothing definitive yet," Burkholder said. "Obviously, the sale of the rec center would be short term, but at the end of the day, with the cuts that have come from Ohio, taxpayers have enjoyed the break, but it's really pushed responsibility down from the state to the local level."

As the need for funding increases, Mayor Greg Retherford said, he hopes residents understand why the village needs more money.

"At this point, what we need to do is just get the information to the public and show them what we're working with, compared to what we had five or six years ago," Retherford said. "We need to make them aware that if you want services, the money has to come from somewhere. So if they want services, they're going to have to pick up somewhere because at this point, we can't provide it."

Retherford said part of the village's issue is that the community isn't engaged enough in the process. Those who wanted Hartford dissolved, he said, are the only ones who frequent the council meetings.

After an encouraging outpouring of support Nov. 4, Burkholder said, he hopes residents could ride that momentum into being more involved in the community, including those who voted for the dissolution.

"We hope this is an invitation to those few individuals," he said. "It's quite a comment on the situation that 91 people signed a petition and only 19 actually voted for it. There was apparently confusion as to what that would actually do. So we hope that the naysayers come back, work with council and the administration to make the community better. That's been the goal all along."