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Port Henry dissolution raised again

By LOHR McKINSTRY Press-Republican

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PORT HENRY — The question of whether the Village of Port Henry should dissolve is back again.

At this month's Moriah Town Council meeting, Councilor Timothy Garrison moved a resolution, which passed unanimously, asking the Port Henry Village Board to put municipal dissolution on the ballot.

"I think everyone understands that the time has come to move forward," Garrison told the Press-Republican.

REQUESTS FOR VOTE

A dissolution referendum can either be petitioned by residents, as it was the previous time, or the Village Board can pass a motion to put the question up for a vote.

The last vote on whether to dissolve the village as a government unit, held March 16, 2010, failed 186 to 146.

Garrison said he made the motion to ask the village for another vote because he's been hearing from his constituents in the village that they'd like the chance to weigh in on the issue again.

Also, the town would receive at least \$400,000 annually in state dissolution aid, Garrison said, and it would remove a layer of government from the people.

FOR THE FUTURE

"The reason I did the resolution asking for the Village Board to put dissolution to a vote can be answered in two words: the future," he said by email.

"I have been on the town board now for five years. For five years, I have been looking at how we can improve our economic situation and our sustainability as a community. The answer always comes back to having one less layer of government."

Then there's the state aid to towns where villages have dissolved, Garrison said.

"The (State) Department of State is putting monies on the table for towns that have villages that dissolve. In our case, it is a substantial amount of money, almost \$400,000 a year."

He said there's no time frame from the state for getting the money, so it could be for years to come or only a short span — but it would be at least a year.

"The only kicker is that the state doesn't tell you how long they will give this money to the town. The monies the town would receive would go back into the town for improvements, economic development, etc."

SPECIAL DISTRICTS

The resolution is not an attempted takeover of the village, Moriah Town Supervisor Thomas Scozzafava explained.

"Village constituents are also our constituents, and they've been telling us they want a chance to vote," he said. "I think it should be considered."

It's generally accepted that the dissolution vote failed last time because too many special districts, like fire protection, trash collection and sidewalk maintenance, would have been created through the dissolution plan.

Residents believed that those special-district taxes would soon have equaled or surpassed their village taxes.

The Village of Keeseville in Essex and Clinton counties is dissolving at the end of this year, however, and no special taxing districts were created by the dissolution plan there.

'TAXES WOULD GO UP'

Port Henry Village Mayor Ernest Guerin said little has changed since the first dissolution study and vote, and there's no state grant this time to pay for the study.

“We did the study. Taxes would go up to pay for another study. We held six months of meetings, and a consultant worked with us to produce a study.”

The 2009-10 study by a joint village-town committee said village taxes could decrease 24 to 33 percent with dissolution.

The village received a \$50,000 State Department of State grant to study the issue, hiring the Rochester-based Center for Governmental Research to help prepare the dissolution feasibility report.

Guerin said the village is awaiting notification of the town’s resolution.

“We haven’t heard from them yet.”

Guerin said that after the letter informing them of the town’s request is received by the village, he’ll discuss it with the Village Board at a future meeting.

SPURRING ECONOMY

The Village Board is working on economic development, Guerin said, and has contracted with Pride of Ticonderoga to start a Main Street revitalization project.

Some major changes are needed if they want to progress, Garrison said.

“Economic development is sluggish, to say the least. In order for our community to survive and thrive, we need to change our way of doing business.”

He said that if the village dissolved, the Moriah Town Council would appoint a community task force with members from each hamlet.

Moriah has five hamlets now — Mineville, Witherbee, Moriah Center, Moriah Corners, Cheever — and if the village dissolved Port Henry would become the sixth.

“They would be tasked with identifying the needs of each hamlet — such as infrastructure like sidewalks, roads, etc.,” Garrison said.

“Also, I would like to see a Main Street Committee and a Waterfront Committee. And map out the steps it is going to take to get our community where we want it to be.

“The only way this all works is total community involvement,” he concluded.

“People fear change. But what I fear is no change at all.”

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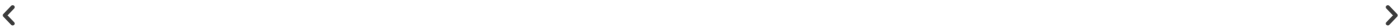
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