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ECONOMY

Richfield Springs considering dissolution

AMANDA FRIES

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Circa: 1861. Population: 1,264. Fate of the village: Tuesday, Oct. 15.

Village residents will have the opportunity to vote Tuesday on whether the village of Richfield Springs - a quaint Otsego County community just outside the Herkimer County border - should be dissolved.

The vote comes after Richfield Springs resident Alex Shields, a former Otsego County legislator and long-time proponent for dissolution of the village, petitioned the local government for a referendum vote on the matter.

In the last 10 years, according to the New York Department of State, 10 villages have dissolved. Since 2008, 10 villages have voted to dissolve. There currently are 550 villages in the state.

The village of Whitesboro in 2011 considered dissolution after one resident was motivated to eliminate a layer of government and reducing taxes. The village also had racked up \$498,000 in debt. The result of the public referendum, however, was 709 to 366 against dissolving the village.

Shields asserted that money could be saved by eliminating duplicate services between the town of Richfield and the village.

“In my opinion, there is redundancy in the town and village offerings,” he said. “I think it is significant enough to go this route.”

Village officials argue just the opposite, and Mayor Ronald Frohne III said he doesn't see much, if any, cost savings.

“We don't have a police department, the village provides fire for the town,” he said. “The village has a library, the town doesn't. There's nothing to consolidate.”

The tax rate per thousand for the 2013-14 budget year is about \$10.70, down from the 2012-13 year at \$10.81.

“We've been able to keep the tax rate flat for the last five years,” Frohne said. “Finances are great. All of our debts are in the water and sewer.”

Savings?

Oftentimes, citizens and elected officials consider dissolution of a municipality because of a perceived savings, said Michael Hattery, the director of Local Government Studies at the Rockefeller Institute of Government.

“We're in an area where both citizens and local officials are doing whatever they can to reduce tax burdens on people,” he said. “I think dissolution is something that people believe will do that.”

Hattery said, however, what's most often the case is that village taxes do go down, but town taxpayers' rates go up.

He added that dissolution often is one of many solutions municipalities can consider when attempting to cut costs, alluding to consolidation or shared services.

Richfield Town Supervisor Francis Enjem didn't want to comment on the vote, but did say the townspeople have concern in regard to their taxes.

Village residents' thoughts on the matter varied.

“The village - you're really not getting much for your money,” Elm Street resident Leslie Smith said Wednesday. “I think it'd be a really good idea (to dissolve).”

Meanwhile, Division Street resident Richard Harrison pointed to all the services the village provides - village lights, cemetery and sewer and water.

“You can't dissolve the village, there's too much involved,” he said.

What's next?

If residents decide they want to dissolve the village, Hattery said there's a timetable that must be followed and a study that must be completed.

“The village has to create a committee, and they basically develop a dissolution plan,” he said, adding the decision to dissolve could be reversed with another vote.

Beyond the savings that Shields believes dissolution of the village would bring, he also said that it's his right to petition the government.

“All I'm saying is this is not rocket science. You have a right to vote,” he said. “At the end of the day, this is about people exercising what they feel is to their best interest.”

The village mayor also encouraged residents to come out and vote.

“I would like to say that I think it's an opportunity for those who live in the village to come out and say, 'I support the village,'” Frohne said.

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