

# OBSERVER-DISPATCH

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## POLITICS

# A village divided: Whitesboro dissolution vote nears

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Vote yes, or vote no. Either way, in this village of about 3,900, your vote is going to count.

As soon as the New Year's cheer wears off, 2,450 registered voters here will be eligible to decide whether the village that was incorporated while the War of 1812 was being waged around New England, needs to stay or go.

Those who want to see the village dissolved say taxes are too high for what they receive. Residents who want to keep the village are worried the current level of services would vanish, and that without a village, they would not have an elected government representing them.

People on each side of the issue, which will be before voters Tuesday, have accused each other of dirty politics. Both sides allege their campaign signs have been plucked from the side of the street, and one man was arrested for breaking a sign he alleges was unlawfully placed on his lawn.

"This is a case of is the devil you know better than the devil you don't," said Charles Zettek Jr., vice president & director of government management services for the Center For Governmental Research.

The group — which touts itself as an independent, non-partisan agency for keeping citizens informed — distributed a study in 2008 to consolidate police services in Whitesboro, Whitestown, Oriskany and New York Mills. That report was never fully acted on, although local leaders say they continue to press toward that goal.

"Many of these dissolution petitions are circulated by people who want to reduce taxes, and it sounds like a noble thing to do, but a lot of studies show that while the taxes go down, some don't go down nearly what you would think," Zettek said.

In Whitesboro, the dissolution process began in July when Ed Misiaszek submitted 290 signatures to the village. That amount exceeds the minimum threshold of 10 percent of village's 2,450 registered voters to force the referendum.

The Westmoreland Street resident was arrested after he allegedly destroyed a sign promoting the village. Misiaszek claims the sign was unlawfully placed on his property. His case has not yet been heard in court.

"We pay both a town and a village tax right now," Misiaszek said. "It's common sense to say that if you get rid of a level of government, you're going to save money."

But village Mayor Brenda Gilberti is concerned dissolution may not lower taxes drastically, or if at all, and without a study that states the financial effects of dissolving the village, residents may be voting on something they can not undo.

Gilberti, who became mayor last spring, said she wants the opportunity to right the village's historically imprudent spending.

"We're there, we're working on it," she said. "Just give us a chance."

### **Dissolving villages rare**

A state law that went into effect March 21 streamlines the process by lowering the threshold that forces villages to schedule a dissolution vote. Residents don't need to submit as many signatures on a petition and a study of the impact does not have to be completed until after the vote is approved.

That means many details — such as how police and fire coverage would change — remain unknown about exactly what would happen next if Whitesboro residents vote in favor of the proposal.

There are at least 10,521 taxing districting in New York state, although a third of those, 6,927, are special districts for services such as water, sewer and lighting. Oneida County is made up of 350 taxing districts, including 268 special districts, according to the state Attorney General's Office.

Since March, when the New N.Y. Government Reorganization And Citizen Empowerment Act was enacted, eight villages have voted on proposals to dissolve. The village of Altmar, in Oswego County, is the only village that chose to dissolve.

Patrick O'Connor lives in the village and spent his childhood living in the town of Whitestown.

"I bought my first and second houses in the village, and that is where I remain today," O'Connor said. "I couldn't imagine not living in Whitesboro."

O'Connor, a former Whitesboro police officer and current member of the Fire Department, is part of Concerned Citizens to Save the Village of Whitesboro.

"I think that people need to think with common sense and not with emotion," he said. "I am just as upset as the next person about the financial position that the village of Whitesboro is in. But the answer to the problem is not to vote to close our village doors forever."

Jan Zabek, who lives and works in Whitesboro, said he believes too many layers of government exist and money can be saved by consolidating services and removing some of the village's boards.

"There are three boards that are paid, a codes guy who also happens to work with the town, the village attorney, a judge who has assistants — those positions can be eliminated," Zabek said. "You just keep going down the list. We heat and insure six buildings. There has to be some savings there."

Zabek said he is happy Tuesday's vote has spurred a lot of debate about saving money, although he thinks voters will likely keep the village around.

"I think, being in business today, people are doing everything they can just to survive," he said. "When you don't see that happening elsewhere it drives you crazy."

## **Taxes**

The village's total budget is about \$2,666,996, The tax rate per \$1,000 of assessed valuation is \$14.69, meaning residents with a house assessed at \$50,000 pay \$734 in village taxes. During the 2010-11 fiscal year, taxpayers were levied \$1,457,205 in village taxes.

Whitesboro residents saw a 49 percent increase in their taxes during the current fiscal year because the village is now paying off a \$498,000 revenue anticipation note.

Half of that note the village received last year has already been paid back, with interest, the mayor said.

"In the worse case scenario, taxes will stay at this level for one more year, then they will dip back down," Gilberti said.

If the village is dissolved, special taxing districts would need to be set up to pay off existing village debt and for services as sewer and water and fire and police protection, Wade Beltramo, general counsel for the New York Conference of Mayors, told of a crowd of residents during a December meeting.

## **What could happen?**

For Whitestown Supervisor Charles Gibbs II, the village voters' decision could drastically affect the way the town, which has a 2011 budget of \$6,236,491, operates in upcoming years.

"How this is going to affect the village taxpayers, and in the town as well, we don't know how costs are going to be effected," he said. "I have people who call and what specific numbers, how much is this service or that service going to cost, and we don't know right now."

Gibbs added: "People shouldn't be forced to vote on what may happen."

If village residents approve the dissolution, the village board would need to form a plan to dissolve. Then the town would in charge of enacting that plan.

"The study may show that we need seven more people in DPW to perform what the village is doing right now," said Gibbs, a village resident. "We might get into it and realize we only need four, or 10. There are a lot of uncertainties. Nobody is going to know what the costs are after a year or two."

Gibbs said the town is not trying to "take over" the village. His hands are already full steering the town down a path that doesn't end in financial ruin.

"We don't want to tell people what to do," Gibbs said. "We don't plan on stepping on anyone's toes."

Three Town Board members also live in the village of Whitesboro.

If residents choose to dissolve, and the plan shows scant savings to taxpayers, another petition can be filed forcing a vote to rescind the dissolution. That petition needs 25 percent of registered voters.

"I think in the absence of any other information, people need to vote on whether they believe the town government will do a better job than the village government," Zettek said.