

NEWS

'The community stays'

Town of Hastings closes up shop, hands keys off to St. Johns County

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Published 11:01 p.m. ET Feb. 28, 2018 | Updated 5:20 a.m. ET March 2, 2018

In many ways it was another sunny Wednesday morning in the Town of Hastings. The fields were being worked, the cabbage was getting boxed, the streets were quiet and the basketball court at Al Wilke Park was seeing some use from an impromptu game.

But behind the cluttered desk of the otherwise empty office of town manager Shelby E. Jack, it was a bittersweet day.

Employees trickled in to say farewell and turn in equipment or final reports. In just a few hours she would be in the St. Johns County Administration Building signing documents formally dissolving the town and handing over the keys to the town's government office and community center on S. Main Street.

In November, 82 percent of Hastings voters cast a ballot to dissolve the town and revoke its charter in the hopes the county's stewardship would result in lower property taxes, decreased water and wastewater utility rates, and increased service levels.

A months-long transition process culminated Wednesday with Jack's signature on the relevant paperwork, meaning all of Hastings's roughly 600 residents now reside in unincorporated St. Johns County.

County Administrator Michael Wanchick has said the county recognizes Hastings' rich history and tradition and would partner with the community to preserve those aspects before and after the transition.

Jack, a lifelong resident of Hastings, says she sees the town's dissolution as more of a new chapter than the end of an era.

"We've worked for a common goal and it sustained us this far," she said. "The Town of Hastings may be small in stature but we've always been, and will continue to be, big at

heart.”

Jack started her run with the town in 1978, through a summer youth program that provided students with job training. She worked her way up from mopping the floors and cleaning the restrooms to a full-time position. In 1997, she was appointed town manager.

“There’s no me without my staff,” she said. “Wherever they go they are going to be assets, to the county or wherever they go. We’re all thankful.”

At the end of the day, it’s not goodbye.

“Dissolution means to dissolve or go away, but the community is still here,” Jack said. “The community stays.”

She said she hopes that the southwest part of county in general will be provided the same opportunities as other parts of the county. She said she wants to see her corner of the county grow and thrive.

Jack will be working in the county’s social services department as a case worker, which she says will allow her to continue working with residents in Hastings and the surrounding areas.

County spokesman Michael Ryan told The Record this week that 10 of 13 employees of the Town of Hastings have accepted positions with the county, with the remaining three opting to retire. He said the county is continuing to look for open positions for Hastings employees that match with their experience.

In terms of day-to-day operations, the county is not planning to operate a full-service annex office in Hastings, but Ryan said residents will be able to do such things as pay their utility bills at the library.

“The community embraces that library,” he said. “They know those people and they trust them. We want to make it as convenient as possible for them.”

Leading up to the dissolution vote, residents had voiced support for their community but concerns about the town government’s financial viability, including infrastructure upkeep. Some said they feel like they were paying for an unnecessary extra layer of government.

The county says residents will notice an almost immediate drop in their water bills, depending on their use. The Florida Department of Transportation will also forgive the town's debt of about \$237,000.

But challenges remain.

Wanchick has said a total of about \$3 million in capital improvement will likely be required over five years with as much as \$1.1 million needed in the first year. Ahead of the dissolution vote, county commissioners decided against establishing a utility surcharge to adopt existing county rates for Hastings utility customers or implementing a Municipal Service Taxing Unit/Municipal Service Benefit Unit to address other operational costs.

Hastings Quick Facts

Founded: 1890

Incorporated: 1909

Population: 604 (University of Florida, 2015)

Dissolved: 2018

Nickname: "Potato Capital of Florida"