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A Lesson in Dissolution From Johnson City

By Bill Chaisson

Mar 24, 2010

On Monday, Mar. 22 the "dissolution study committee" of the Village of Candor met with Bill Klish, the chair of the committee that sought to dissolve the Village of Johnson City. "We needed to find real savings," Klish told the village committee, "because we were looking at double-digit increases in property taxes. We found millions in savings." If Johnson City had dissolved, it would have become part of the town of Union. The population of the village of Johnson City is 15,700 and that of the town of Union 26,000. By way of comparison, Candor Village's population is 855; Candor Town boasts 5,317. (Numbers from 2000 Census.)

"I'm giving you an approach that worked well for us. It may be a starting point for you," he told the committee. "See what might work for you."

The meeting was held at the Candor town hall and was also attended by the mayor of Candor Steve Sparling and town supervisor Darlene Cobler. Klish brought a three-ring binder full of documents for the Candor committee and, over the course of a hour and a half, explained the nature of most of them and answered questions from the committee.

"In our case the town residents' taxes would have gone down 16 percent," said Klish. One of the local committee members asked how the town saved money through village dissolution. "They get one million dollars a year from the state," Klish replied immediately, "every year that it is available. Every community gets the same amount." He assured the committee that this money was still available in spite of New York State's financial problems because it has been placed in a special fund. "The state has a lot of expenses with so many municipalities," Klish continued, "so they encourage dissolution."

Klish made frequent reference to a certified public accountant on his committee. "We had a CPA who understood the financials," he said. "It was a big help; it was good to have someone who could challenge the consultant." Johnson City used CGR, a consultant firm that specializes in dissolutions, to advise them during their two-year process.

"The consultant came on board in April 2008," recalled Klish. "Our vote was on November 3, 2009. The consultant does the 'back off' from the date of the vote." In other words, they established deadlines that the committee had to meet in order to meet state regulations. "We had to get the referendum text to the county by September 16," said Klish. The committee chair has maintained a correspondence with the CGR consultant, who called him recently to tell him of the successful vote to dissolve the Village of Seneca Falls.

The Johnson City committee applied for a state grant that would cover the expenses associated with the dissolution process. "It was approved in May 2008, but it wasn't until August 2008 that we got the first payment from the state," said Klish. He described making frequent phone calls to Albany and being told repeatedly to wait two more weeks. "It was a real eye-opener for committee members to see what village and town officials go through with the state."

In the case of Johnson City and Union there were many corresponding services between the village and the town. Both had zoning and planning boards, for example, but while the town got police protection from the state troopers and county sheriff, the village had a large police department. Klish said that the police and fire departments ultimately proved to be the biggest obstacle to dissolution.

"Thirty-two people would [have lost] their jobs with dissolution," he said. "The police and fire departments, and some clerical positions, but mostly the police." Klish said that the union and police benevolent association came after the committee and generated a lot of fear in the community, saying that police protection would be inadequate without a village government.

In fact, the dissolution committee's plan called for 26 village policemen to keep their jobs, working for the sheriff's department, but assigned exclusively to what had been the village of Johnson City. (He encouraged Candor to make a similar arrangement with Tioga County.) Klish said that many opposed to dissolution spread misinformation, which ultimately caused it to fail in the November vote.

In contrast, Klish found many of the officials who worked in village and town departments to be helpful and respectful, even though they stood to take a pay cut if dissolution went through. Johnson City employees tended to make 30 to 50 percent more than Town of Union employees of comparable

responsibilities and tenure.

Klish's committee eventually identified millions of dollars in savings through consolidation of services caused by dissolution of the village, including \$2.5 million in the police department and \$1.5 million in the fire department. "Why did you lose?" asked a member of the Candor committee.

"There was enough fear created about the police-that the protection wouldn't be there," Klish said, "and members of the fire department said 'If your house is on fire we're not coming to put it out.' People were fearful." He said that out of 8,000 registered voters in the village, only a little more than 4,000 turned out to vote, good by Johnson City standards, but low considering the importance of the issue.

"We were told by our attorney not to get belligerent with people who were lying," said Klish. "We stuck with the presentation of the facts. Even when people confronted me in public-they'd say, 'How should I vote?'-I'd just say 'People have to make up their own minds.'"

The members of the Candor dissolution study committee include Gwen Isham (chair), Frank Musgrave, Jerry Ahart, Butch Crowe, Fred Quinlan, Bob Houck and Teresa Twarz.