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Lyons leaders fault dissolution

Village government ceases

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At the stroke of midnight Dec. 31, the village of Lyons, Wayne County, ceased to exist.

Sure, the buildings, streets, roads and of course the 3,600 residents will remain. But, the village government that's run the village since its incorporation in 1854 will be no more.

It's something village voters approved with two votes, in 2012 and 2014, when they were offered the chance to lower taxes by dissolving the village government and handing over responsibility for services to the Town of Lyons.

But with the switch imminent, leaders of both the village and town say the state's framework for dissolution is problematic, resulting in a "bait and switch" where voters were asked to weigh in on a dissolution plan created by the village that town officials aren't bound to abide. For example, said village Mayor Terry VanStean, the village's plan called for retaining the police department, but the town opted instead to close it. shut it down.

"It just comes out that people are voting on something and the consequences aren't understood," he said, noting that the referendum voters approved explicitly asked whether or not they approved implementing the village's dissolution plan. "The gotcha to the whole thing is once the dissolution is approved, all the decision-making of how dissolution is going to happen falls to the town, and they can literally take the plan the village produced and put it right in the circular file. The only thing binding is the date of dissolution."

He said the law in its current state is "very misleading."

Town Supervisor Brian Manktelow said the law should allow town residents a vote on dissolution, since they will also be affected by consolidation.

But the most important reform he's calling for would be letting the towns develop dissolution plans, rather than the villages, "since it's all going to go to the town anyways and the town's not under any obligation to stick to the village's plan. Let the town create the plan for the way it's all going to be done and that way there are no surprises. It only makes sense that the entity taking over the former village should come up with the plan."

There's been a state push for local government consolidations that ramped up beginning in 2008. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has long been a proponent of eliminating and combining some of the thousands of different government entities — towns, villages, fire districts and school districts — that each collect taxes from New Yorkers. With the state's notoriously high property taxes frequently cited as a reason for economic stagnation and the loss of residents to states where costs are lower, it makes sense to find cost savings through shared services, consolidation and dissolution.

According to the Empire Center for New York State Policy, at least 10 villages governments have dissolved in the past five years, including Seneca Falls in Seneca County. In 2015, voters in Medina, Orleans County, rejected dissolution, while voters in Macedon, Wayne County, Hermon, St. Lawrence County, and Port Henry, Essex County, were among those approving dissolution of villages.

JEFFREY BLACKWELL/ FILE PHOTO

Voters in Lyons, Wayne County, passed a dissolution vote in 2012.

In nearly all cases, high village taxes were a driving factor in the outcome.

In Lyons, residents of the former village will see their property taxes drop by 62 percent and town residents overall will see their town tax fall by about 7 percent, said Manktelow. And, he said, while it was not economically feasible to keep the village police department — doing so would have resulted in a doubled town tax rate — as the merged government moves forward, former village residents will benefit from a broader tax base that will now be able to pay for more maintenance to the infrastructure: roads, water lines and sewer systems.

As for the police, Wayne County Sheriff Barry Virts said his department and State Police will take over responding to incidents in the former village on a "closest car" basis. He said residents should see little change in their overall police protection.

"Since June, the Sheriff's Office and state police have taken all calls from midnight to 8 a.m. and nobody seems to have noticed any voids," he said. "And, since October, both organizations have been doing all major crime investigations and arrests in Lyons. It is sad the police department is going to dissolve, but the democratic process has spoken and the people in the village no longer want to be a municipality. My office will treat Lyons like any other town in Wayne County, and we seem to do very well there."

VanStean said he's proud that the village was able to turn over its operations and equipment with no outstanding debts. The only financial obligation the town will have to pick up in the future is providing for village retiree health care, and VanStean said the village provided $1.5 million to the town that will cover those costs for years to come.

By way of advice for communities considering a dissolution vote, VanStean said this: "I caution anyone considering this that they need to be 100 percent aware that they need to beware of what they're promised. Just because you have a plan doesn't mean that's going to be what happens."

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