

Village Government: A Principal Competitive Asset

SUMMARY

The ability of East Aurora to offer its residents a high quality of life for over a century is no accident. It has taken consistent effort to protect its walkable neighborhoods and historic assets, and the primary reason this constant vigilance has been able to occur is because of the autonomy and local control village voters have over their village government. Our village officials, elected in non-partisan elections, are beholden to no one except to their neighbors and to their own logic. Diverse board members make appointments to the many volunteer boards, and two-year terms allow for turnover if residents feel change is needed. Village votes are diluted in town-wide elections, and it is only natural that those living outside the village have a different set of concerns than those living in the village. Village voters will become more outnumbered as the town-outside-village population continues to grow.

Although it seems counterintuitive, cost savings due to consolidation will be nominal to nil and we will be left with a larger, less personal government. To maintain the same level of service for village residents, special districts will need to be set up that will require management and oversight that is now done by the village. Most villages in New York State, after expensive studies have been paid for, have voted *down* proposed dissolution plans, noting that cost savings come from consolidating and sharing government services rather than actual mergers of governments. East Aurora, with its reputation for historic preservation and high quality of life has more to lose than perhaps any other village in the state. Dissolution of East Aurora is not inevitable! East Aurora is the Village that did not fall prey to the allure of big-box development offering inexpensive goods because the costs to our village character would be too high. The prospect of a consolidated government with its false promise of inexpensive service is now just as great a threat to our village character.

Why Do Village Governments Exist in the First Place?

From: NYCOM News Release, August 13, 2008

People create villages when they decide they want particular public services and to exercise greater local control. This pure form of self-governance allows residents to design an efficient government that provides services for which they are willing to pay.

People tend to assume that multiple levels of government must equate to duplication of services. When it comes to villages, this is usually not the case. Dissolving a full-service village into a low-service town can actually result in inefficiencies by forcing a town to either set up numerous special districts, or provide the service town-wide.

In most instances, propositions for village dissolution are voted down because the dissolution plan reveals that village dissolution will not achieve cost savings sufficient enough to offset the diminution in the quality of services and level of control over village issues.

2006: The Village of Wellsville voted down a proposition to dissolve the village.

2007: The Village of Windsor's study committee found that dissolving the village would result in nominal savings for village taxpayers; it recommended that the village not dissolve because the cost-savings were insufficient to justify the village residents' loss of local control.

2008: Three Villages had dissolution propositions on their ballots. After spending months of staff time and thousands of taxpayer dollars developing dissolution plans and reports, Macedon and Speculator rejected village dissolution; Pike, population 382 (2000 census) voted to dissolve effective 12/31/09.

2009: Limestone, pop. 411 (2000 census) voted to dissolve effective 1/1/11, and is expected to become a "*census designated place*" on that day.

2005: Creation of the Village of Sagaponack

2006: Creation of the Villages of South Blooming Grove and Woodbury

A Few Facts:

- 1) People are satisfied with and attracted to the quality of life maintained in villages. As the total population of Erie County has declined over the past 50 years, the village share of the county's population has remained relatively constant (in the range of 9.2% to 9.8 %).
- 2) Village taxes levied in Erie County have remained constant between 2004-2007.
- 3) Between 2004 and 2007, the \$49.6 million **increase** in county property taxes was 50% greater than the **total** amount of village property taxes collected in 2007 (\$33 million).

Study by the League of Women Voters of Buffalo/Niagara *“Local Government Committee, Merger/Consolidation Study”*

The committee went into the study expecting to find that local government consolidations and mergers would be universally encouraged to save money and improve efficiency. Most of the information the committee found did not support this expectation.

Conclusion:

The study recommends looking into various kinds of cooperation, consolidation, and sharing government services rather than actual mergers of government structures.

Some of the findings:

- A report from the office of Governor Pataki (1998) notes that a consolidated town and village may receive less state and federal aid than the sum of the aid for the two separate entities.
- The study, “A Century of Debate about Regionalism and Metropolitan Government” (Margaret Weir) concludes that, by itself, governmental form is rarely a decisive factor in shaping regional outcomes.
- Reformers may make so many accommodations to special interests in order to get a merger passed that possible savings are compromised.

The Department of State: *“Implications of Dissolution”*

Conclusion: Communities should first investigate other simpler kinds of changes that might save money or improve services:

- Combining separate employee positions into one, such as clerk-treasurer.
- Merging whole departments such as those providing highway services.
- Jointly using buildings (town/village or equipment garage).
- Appointing one person to fill the same position in both town and village governments

They provide a checklist for the potential **“Consolidation for Towns and Villages”**— suggested management improvements before town-village consolidation should be considered. There are many things on the list for us to explore before we even consider town-village consolidation.

Report by the Ellenville Government Study Committee: *Village Dissolution*

A citizens' committee studied all areas of consolidation for their town/village: courts, water and sewer, streets, building and code enforcement, youth programs, police dept.

Study conclusions:

- The presumed savings some believe would come from dissolution are simply not there, unless you eliminate desired services that Village residents have repeatedly said they want. The availability of these services is why the Village exists as a separate municipality in the first place.
- It is unknown to what extent Town taxpayers would be willing to maintain current levels of service for a hamlet they can consistently outvote. The Village taxpayers must still pay Village debt.
- Turning things over to the Town is not a real solution, only a passing of the buck to an entity that has shown no superior ability to wisely address issues of planning, resources, or use of funds.
- To maintain the level of services now enjoyed, the Town would likely have to create special districts requiring Village residents to maintain several bureaucracies instead of just one. It would require roughly the same number of workers to do the same work, whether as separate districts or as part of the Town workforce, unless one believes that current Village employees are not now doing a full workload.
- The legal and accounting process of dissolution will cost many hundreds of thousands of dollars and years of legal and financial unraveling to implement, as all the current debts and assets have to be resolved; there has to be transition time for dealing with zoning codes and local laws.
- In most instances, propositions for village dissolution are voted down because the dissolution plan reveals that village dissolution will not achieve the significant cost savings that the dissolution proponents assumed. In addition, the relatively minor cost-savings are deemed not worth the diminution of village residents' voting power regarding village issues.
- Before the village dissolution process is started, village officials may wish to look at alternative methods of improving service and cutting costs, such as through inter-municipal cooperation.

Report commissioned by the Association of Towns of the State of NY *Wendell Cox, May 2008*

Former Governor Eliot Spitzer established a “*Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness*”. The Commission’s premise was that consolidating and regionalizing local governments and services would improve New York’s competitiveness and efficiency. This report, however, debunks the assumption that local government consolidation will result in cost savings or better governance.

In fact, careful analysis of government consolidations across the nation clearly shows that consolidation and regionalization are more likely to make New York *less efficient and competitive*, leaving its citizens with a *diminished* quality of life.

Report Conclusions:

The “bigger is better” theory for governments simply does not hold up:

- 1) Government consolidation does not improve government efficiency.
- 2) Nationally, states with larger governments are not more efficient.
- 3) **There is a strong association between smaller units of local government and greater government efficiency in New York.**
- 4) **New York’s system of smaller local governments is a *principal competitive asset*.**
- 5) Consolidation detaches people from their local governments, marginalizes their influence on their immediate surroundings, and facilitates greater influence of special interests.
- 6) Virtually all the difference between New York and the national average of state and local spending is not due to more units of government, but to higher spending on the following four functions:
 - personnel salaries
 - education
 - public welfare
 - interest on debt.

What would our East Aurora look like today if we had not had our Village Government for the past 20 years?

- Would we have a Wal-Mart in Commerce Green?

A new Village Board was elected over this issue, demonstrating the responsiveness of our village government, with its 2-year terms and 7-member boards, to concerns of village residents.

- How would our historic Main Street and its businesses have fared with competing big-box development?

- How would our Main Street look?

Would there be pedestrian amenities, diverse, hardy tree species?
The Roycroft wall would be truncated and the grand entrance to the Roycroft Campus would not exist.

- How many additional drive-thrus would have been approved?

- Would there be sidewalks in front of Parkdale? Bike paths through Knox Farm?

- Would there have been as much care to the appearance of site plans and of commercial creep into residential neighborhoods?

To believe that the priorities of those elected to the Town Board by a town-wide vote as they are today will suddenly change if the Village Government disappears is a dangerous assumption with no basis.

What We Stand to Lose

Our Village Character

Historic Preservation (the core identity of our village)

The Town Board dismissed a proposed Historic Preservation Ordinance for the Town in 2004, questioning whether there were any historic properties in the Town and felt that it was unnecessary regulation. If the Village dissolves, our Certified Local Government status goes away as well. There is no doubt that the most historically significant resource along our Main Street (the Roycroft wall) would not have been protected if the Town Board had furnished the local input sought by the DOT, rather than the Village Board. The Town Board went on record as opposing its protection/reconstruction.

A walkable village with protected neighborhoods

Village votes will be diluted by town votes, which historically have not been tuned in to village needs and needed protections. Town voters will increasingly outnumber village voters as the town's population increases.

Our brand name and identity (“Visit the Historic Village of East Aurora”)

The Village of East Aurora is a special and successful place—a 130-year-old experiment that has worked. East Aurora is front and center in the new PBS documentary on Elbert Hubbard being broadcast nation-wide. Why would we now allow this treasure, the very heart of our Town, to be absorbed into a larger government with different priorities? From a purely economic point of view, its identity is critically important for marketing and tourism development.

Diverse representation

More power will be in fewer hands. Most likely two elected officials will be making all decisions and appointing all committee members.

A layer of government that is exceptionally responsive to the everyday concerns of our community and people.

Non-partisan elections

Partisan elections will require candidates to spend more time, money, and more organization to run. We will lose the expertise and energy of residents who do not want to be beholden to a political party, but only want to give time and energy to the village.

Resistance to corruption or capture by special interests

Larger, non-partisan boards are generally better able to represent diverse public opinion, respond to demands for constituent service, deliberate reflectively, tackle complex or controversial issues, and resist corruption or capture by special interests. (UB Regional Institute Policy Brief)

National Trust for Historic Preservation:

America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places: 11. Village of East Aurora

Year Listed: 1995 **Location:** East Aurora, New York

Current Status: **Saved***

Threat: Development

Significance

Accessible by only three two-lane roads, East Aurora is the site of the historic Roycroft campus, which played a major role in the founding of the American Arts and Crafts Movement. East Aurora's Main Street draws merchants who contribute greatly to the community through sponsorship of civic activities while providing a variety of goods and services for the village's 6,000 residents. The economic health of Main Street, and the contribution it makes to East Aurora's sense of community, has been threatened by the potential commercial development of a Wal-Mart on a large tract of land located at the edge of the village. In addition to draining the economic vitality from downtown businesses, the proposed oversized retail center would clog the small-town roads, stimulate sprawl on the village outskirts and irreparably alter the qualities that make East Aurora a popular place in which to live and do business.

* **Did we dodge the Wal-Mart bullet only to be killed by government consolidation?**

Suggested Actions for the East Aurora VBOT

- Study and communicate existing reports on village dissolutions, perhaps avoiding that costly expense for our community.
- Actively communicate the advantages and long-term cost-savings of an efficient joint town/village/library facility on Main Street.
- Initiate talks between the Highway Department and the Village DPW to consolidate overlapping functions, or perhaps the departments.
- Initiate a joint town/village planning board.
- Initiate joint town/village meetings.

What can we achieve?

- Cost savings without loss of representation.
- Cost savings without the threat of losing our Village identity that has made us the envy of other communities for the past 130 years.