

Committee Reviews Merger Process At Meeting

Village Gives Report; Plan Made To Bring List Of Issues To May 23 Meeting

Town resident Bev Burmester came to the May 9 merger study committee meeting with a list of questions for committee members. But before she was able to check too many questions off her list, she realized that the questions she was asking were a little premature since the entire process was in its very early stages.

Burmester's questions were received with raised brows from Committee members concerned that the process was being misunderstood. Answers came fast, explaining that the merger study committee's job is to determine feasibility of a Town-Village merger and bring those findings to the Town and Village boards for consideration.

Committee Member and Village Trustee Micah Zielke said if the Town and Village boards found the Committee's recommendations favorable for a merger and approved the go ahead for a merged Cottage Grove, it would still require court and state review, and ultimately need to meet the approval of the voters from both communities. Committee Member and Town Supervisor Mike DuPlayee said that public participation has and will continue to be encouraged at every merger meeting, adding that there will be public hearings scheduled to give additional opportunities for Cottage Grove residents to come out to ask questions and get answers.

Dates for these hearings have

not been scheduled and the dates for compiling the committee report for the boards might be extended past the current January 2012 deadline. The possible extension would be due in part to cancellation of the March and April merger study meetings, which were not made up.

Zielke accepted the responsibility of setting up a time line for the process, which he will present at the next merger study committee meeting scheduled for at 7 p.m on May 23 at the Village Hall.

Zielke said it was time to start talking about the issues, suggesting the next meeting be more of a working session. This was met with agreement from the Committee, and members were tasked with bringing a list of issues they felt necessary for review. Those issues will be compiled into a single list to be used as a template to begin working on as discussion points at future meetings.

Beyond discussing the merger study process, the Committee also looked at the Village's fiscal situation. Committee Co-Chairperson and Town Chairman Kris Hampton asked how the Village's water and sewer utility were set up. Zielke said that there were separate audits for water and sewer. There was discussion of whether the town, which is currently on well and septic systems, would have to be brought into the Village's water and sewer system. Committee Member and Village Resident Mark Heffinger

asked whether the town would get and pay for water and sewer. This was of particular concern for homes that would be built in the Town area after a merger. Hampton said he wondered how it would work if there were multiple homes in a neighborhood and if one homeowner wanted to be hooked in right away while another didn't want to be brought in at that time. Zielke said that he would have to see how the ordinance read regarding requirements to hook up to the Village water and sewer, adding that if needed, changes could be made to the Town's and Village's liking regarding this ordinance. The Village's 2006 facilities master plan was another item Hampton inquired on. Zielke said this is something that could be brought into the discussion.

The meeting discussion moved from finance to talk of why the merger was being considered in the first place. Hampton explained the annexations of Town land by the Village and city of Madison threaten to slowly eat up the municipality's land and tax base. Hepfinger said for most residents, whether the merger happens will boil down to what it will cost property owners in taxes. "Why do I care if I'm in Madison or the village," said Hepfinger, explaining that different people will look at the merger in different ways depending on where they live.

"There are people on the west side looking at the investment,"

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said Hampton. "Their impetus will be, 'I can develop in the higher density in Madison.' When you look at the west side of the Town near Madison they may say, 'are my development dollars greater in Madison or the Village?' And most are going to say the City."

There are so many variables, said Zielke, explaining that different residents have different ideas of what they want for their community. "Some are looking at it as an investment, others are looking to see where they can get the best tax benefit and others are looking to the rural benefits." Small town appeal rather than tax or investment benefits is what DuPlayee says people are considering when they look at a place like Cottage Grove.

But if residents do decide a merged Cottage Grove is best, there will be a need for teamwork and sharing of resources. And for

the Town and Village, sharing is something they are familiar with as they share a police, fire and rescue services through a joint agreement. Village President and Committee Co-Chairperson Diane Wiedenbeck briefed Committee members on a Wisconsin Town Lawyers Conference she attended at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which she said had plenty of information regarding shared community services.

"The fact that other communities merge services or consolidate successfully was encouraging to me," said Wiedenbeck in an email. "Trust between the parties was mentioned many times. Most communities have some shared resources; we have several and are continuing to look for more. This is not always a quick process. It can take years so to assume we'd be done in less than a year may have been correct, but the study we are doing now is only a part

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of the process. There is a decided need to make sure the citizens of both Town and Village are kept informed.

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