



Whit Smith, an Erwin resident against the merger talks about changes to taxes. ERIC WENSEL/THE LEADER

Village's future debated at packed forum

By Derrick Ek

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PAINTED POST | How much, exactly, will taxes drop? Will police and fire protection and other services be affected? Will life in Painted Post change at all?

With a vote set for Jan. 24 on whether to dissolve the village government and merge with the surrounding Town of Erwin, those were some of the key questions addressed

as several hundred people jammed the West High cafeteria for a forum that featured speakers both for and against.

Two very different visions were outlined.

Whit Smith, an Erwin resident and a member of Save Painted Post, argued for keeping the village government intact.

"Money is a big part of this conversation, but it's not just about the money," he said.

While the dissolution

vote was brought about by a petition drive under the state's Citizen Empowerment Act in response to years of high taxes in Painted Post, Smith noted that the tax rate in the village had dropped sharply this year, the result of significant cost-cutting measures recently implemented by village officials, he said.

And more potential sources of revenue could help even further, such

as the five-year contract recently signed by the village to sell municipal water for shale gas drilling in Pennsylvania, he noted.

Smith said his analysis of tax data showed the residents' tax rate wouldn't drop all that much if the village dissolved.

"This is a close-knit community," Smith said. "You have excellent

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services by people who know you. Decisions get made on a local level. There's great community events and community spirit."

But Phyllis Draper, a longtime village resident and member of Painted-PostTaxRelief.org, which led the petition drive, sees things differently.

She said police and fire protection could still be provided, they would just operate differently, as special districts within the Town of Erwin. The police department might even be expanded to cover Erwin, too, she said. Other services, such as leaf pickup and road maintenance, would still be provided, just by the

town, she said.

Operating costs would be spread over a much larger, more stable tax base, she said.

And village residents could be elected to serve on the Erwin Town Board or as town supervisor, providing representation for the village, Draper said.

By her calculations, the amount village residents pay in taxes would drop a significant amount if Painted Post dissolved.

Recent cost-cutting measures weren't enough, Draper said.

"While these things will help, they are not going to be a long-term solution to the village's problems," she said.

Draper also cautioned residents that revenues from the water deal shouldn't be relied on too much, because sales can vary greatly depending on demand.

While the deal allows up to a million gallons of water to be sold daily, which would equate to roughly \$20 million over five years, only \$3.2 million is guaranteed, she said.

For example, only 10 million gallons have been taken since operations began at the tanker train loading facility this summer, and no water has been taken since Sept. 30, she said.

Also, the operation is currently being challenged in state Supreme Court by environmental groups and local residents who say the impact of withdrawing large amounts of water from the Corning aquifer, as well as the impact of trains running through the village, was not properly assessed.

A lot of people at Wednesday's meeting indicated in a show of hands they were still undecided on how to vote.

The process that led to

the Jan. 24 vote actually began back in 2009, when village officials began exploring ways to tackle financial woes.

In December 2010, the board hired a consultant, the Rochester-based Center for Governmental Research, to do a study on potential ways to deal with the financial problems. Three Rivers Development, a local economic development agency, paid \$58,000 to the consultant. A citizen committee was formed to assist in the study.

Following the study, in January 2011, a merger with Erwin was recommended, but trustees never moved forward with dissolution.

A few months later, the village signed the water deal.

This year, PaintedPost-TaxRelief.org led the petition drive that forced the village board to set the vote.