

NEWS

One Batavia: Less cost, more revenues

Print Page

Committee presents city/town consolidation report

By Joanne Beck jbeck@batavianews.com

Published: Tuesday, June 2, 2009 1:17 PM EDT

BATAVIA -- A three-tiered system, reduced expenses and increased state revenues would be part of one Batavia, Charles Zettek says.

The setup for police and fire protection and the school district would remain the same.

Zettek, of the Center for Governmental Research, presented a city and town consolidation report Monday evening that included those components.

"There are no pie charts or graphs. This is an overview to give you an idea of all the variables it took to create a consolidated community," he said during the presentation at Town Hall. "The committee has not developed recommendations. "The committee asked, 'do we have options?' Yes, there are two options: Continue as separate governments or consolidate the two governments."

Consolidating the city and town of Batavia would potentially reduce overall administrative costs by \$212,000, plus some \$820,000 in additional state revenue, for the first year. The state money would come from a consolidation incentives program, Zettek said.

A somewhat complicated calculation of revenues, expenses and other items including employee compensation and gross utilities receipts tax for three tiers within the city and town would mean a potential savings of \$943,000 in the first year, Zettek said.

Committee member Jeffrey Scott said the study, especially the numbers, were quite impressive.

"If you saw some of the numbers, and we were very conservative with the numbers ... even at the low end the numbers are way better than I ever dreamed," the city resident said. "We thought long and hard on the most equitable way to make it fair for everybody. The one thing I want to stress is ... at least conceptually, you've got to think about the whole thing as ... the whole 55 square miles instead of looking at the city piece and the town piece."

There would be three tiers for tax zones. The first tier would be an all-encompassing territory for common services shared by both town and city. Tier Two would be for "higher intensity services" used by the city, such as police and fire departments. Tier Three would be for "lower intensity services" used in the town, Zettek said.

"There are many advantages to creating one Batavia," he said. "The committee hopes the community will debate the merits of consolidating at the public forums."

The report and supporting documents are available at: www.cgr.org/bataviaconsolidationplan. The public may also e-mail comments to the committee through a link at the site. Public forums are scheduled for 7 p.m. June 18 at City Hall and June 30 at Batavia Town Hall.

The calculations were done with "line by line budget details," Zettek said, and the committee "assumed where there'd be efficiencies."

City Council and town board members sat at a table in front of a group of about 50 spectators and asked questions after the presentation. Councilman Rose Mary Christian expressed her initial reservations.

"I'm not convinced of this report yet," she said. "Because of words like 'approximately' and 'assumed.'"

Council President Charlie Mallow had no such feeling, he said.

"I feel really positive toward consolidation. It's a good path," he said. "It's good to know there's a path to one Batavia. I would like to see some more of the details ... it's good to know it's more beneficial to be a city. The tier structure is a gem. We're able to keep the same services that we have at the same level."

Town Supervisor Greg Post said he was looking forward to reading the 14-page report plus several pages of supporting material.

"I'm pleased to have received it, as late as it is. It's a good starting point," Post said. "I'm convinced the members who've served the community will have a great collaborative effort to research and process this thing and find out what works and decide how to best proceed."

There have been some rumblings of town residents concerned about having to pay property taxes due to a consolidation plan with the city. That's because many people -- both city and town residents -- have had a misconception about what consolidation will mean for them, Mallow said.

It never was intended to include police and fire departments or water and sewer districts. It's to be an evolving plan that's beginning with shared administrative services, he said. Some of the city's cost-cutting will have to be tackled by city officials, he said. "Gradual is the key to the whole thing," Mallow said. "Nothing is going to be changing as far as fire and police. But we can't rest. Part of that is looking at our fire department and probably our police. We've got to reduce."

Increased costs and new taxes are always a concern for the town, Post said. He hopes that town residents will step up and get involved in the consolidation process so their thoughts and opinions are heard.

"We have concerns from the citizens every single year, every single month, every single week; I'm one of them," he said. "Our board is very visible and very available, we're a phone call away ... I would expect the people in this community to, now that they have a living document, to start asking some hard questions."

Scott said he's had to do that. One question has been how can he and his wife keep their daughters from moving away to get good jobs and lower cost services? That's why he volunteered for this committee, he said.

"It's not good enough just to complain about something. You can either do something to change it, change the way you react to it or just shut up about it," he said. "I chose, in my small way, to do something proactive and try to help change the situation."