

# FINGER LAKES TIMES

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## Police coverage is focus of Seneca Falls discussion

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SENECA FALLS — It's clear that many village residents like their police department.

Last night, they told the Town Board and the public safety sub-committee of the Seneca Falls Village Dissolution Study Committee of their satisfaction with police for everything from arresting criminals to getting flying bats out of their houses.

If village residents vote to dissolve village government, that police department would cease to exist. That doesn't sit well with some.

Many in the crowd of about 70 wore T-shirts and held signs supporting the department.

The public safety sub-committee presented four options for police services if the village dissolves itself.

"That is our charge, and that's what we're doing. We must come up with a plan for what happens to police and other services provided by village if the village dissolves," said Phillip Dressing, chairman of the dissolution committee.

The options are:

- **OPTION 1:** The "do nothing" option: Make no special provision for police services.

The responsibility for covering the village would fall to the Seneca County Sheriff's Department.

Sheriff Jack Stenberg has submitted a proposal to add two patrols of 10 officers and a sergeant to provide around-the-clock coverage as part of the department's northern Seneca County coverage plan.

The cost to the county is estimated at \$1.19 million. Scott Sittig of the Center for Governmental Research, who is assisting the committee in the dissolution study, said the savings to village taxpayers would be \$6.42 per \$1,000 of assessed value. The added cost to county taxpayers would be 76 cents per \$1,000 in the first year and 54 cents in the second year.

Sittig listed the positives of this plan as cutting taxes the most and still providing basic police services. The negatives were loss of local control, possible loss of services and putting the decision for services on the county Board of Supervisors.

- **OPTION 2:** Creating a police protection district. The Town Board would have to apply through local state legislators for a special bill to create the district. It would have to be approved by both houses of the state Legislature and signed by the governor.

It would create a boundary for the district, which would be run by an elected board of police commissioners, most likely paid. The board could hire the current police force and determine the level of services and coverage.

Positives of this plan were said to be minimizing the cost shift from the village to the town. Village and town residents would be assessed a fee for police services, much like a fire district, and there would likely be

continuity in services and personnel.

Negatives are involvement of the state Legislature, with Sittig noting that only one such district has been created in the state in the past 90 years.

Another negative is that the savings to village residents would be gone and that it would add another layer of government.

- **OPTION 3:** Creating a town-wide police department.

Village Police Chief Frederick Capozzi gave the sub-committee a plan to cover the town and village with the current number of officers. The sheriff's department and State Police would also continue to provide services as needed.

This plan would save village property owners \$2.84 per \$1,000, while town property owners would begin to pay \$3.58 per \$1,000.

The benefits of this plan, Sittig said, are maintaining local control, saving money for village taxpayers, likely keeping current officers, continuing services and providing a good response time.

The drawbacks are shifting costs from village residents to town residents, uncertainty over sheriff's department and State Police coverage, possible loss of services from covering a larger geographic area, slower response time and the issue of the police contract now in place with the village.

- **OPTION 4:** The town contracting for enhanced police services with the sheriff's department to cover the town and former village.

Stenberg presented a proposal similar to Option 1, with the town negotiating services with the county.

The first-year savings to village taxpayers would be \$3.26 per \$1,000, while town residents would pay \$3.17 per \$1,000.

In year two, that would increase to a savings of \$4.17 per \$1,000 for village residents and a cost of \$2.25 per \$1,000 for town residents.

Sittig said the benefits are savings to village taxpayers, access to other sheriff's department services and maintaining close to the current number of officers covering the town and village.

Negatives were listed as possible loss of some services and loss of some control.

Town Board member Timothy Snyder is a village police officer. Supervisor Peter Same said he would be recused from the discussions, and Snyder agreed. Board member Stephen Dougherty was on vacation.

Dressing asked the three remaining members which option they preferred.

Same said that if pressed, he would support either Options 3 or 4.

"It's a volatile issue. I support the police department and lean toward forming a police district, but I'm willing to look at others," he said.

Lucille Cook said whatever option is chosen should provide the same level of services for town residents as village residents now get.

"But I question whether that level of services can be done with the same number of officers. They may be spread too thin. Whatever option is chosen should tell people the possibility of more officers needed to provide the services and the cost," she said.

She supported the town-wide department or the police district.

Duane Moore said he favors the town-wide department.

Capozzi said the 11 officers could provide police services but acknowledged that the level of service given village residents and response time might not be the same.

Former village trustee Ann Cramer, a strong supporter of the police department as it now exists, asked if the dissolution study could be derailed.

Dressing said the Village Board, at taxpayer request, wants to explore all possible cost savings and shared services and let village residents decide if they want to dissolve village government.

Many spoke in favor of the current police department under village control.

Dressing urged people to see which of the four options the committee will recommend, plus get reports on the options for public works, sewer and water and administration at a Sept. 16 meeting.

Capozzi was asked to come back with information on a town police department providing the same services, including getting bats out of houses.

The full committee will meet again at 6 p.m. Monday. Several other meetings are planned before the committee presents its dissolution plan to the Village Board Dec. 7.

If the trustees approve the plan, it will go to voters in March.