



Our view: Whitestown police merger the way to go

By - **STAFF REPORT**

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Yorkville residents overwhelmingly rejected a proposal last week to abolish its police department and let Oneida County patrol their streets. That's not necessarily a bad thing.

While joining forces with Oneida County would have been a step in the right direction as governments look to lower costs, the opportunity remains for Yorkville and Whitestown's three other villages — New York Mills, Oriskany and Whitesboro — to join forces and create one town police department. That should be a goal as we move into the new year.

Last week, Yorkville voters slam-dunked a proposal to eliminate its police department by a vote of 538 to 100. Under the plan, the department's current three full-time officers would have been offered jobs with the Sheriff's Office. It also would have meant enhanced investigative and supervisory services for the village, with the Sheriff's Office assuming liability costs. Overall, the move was expected to save taxpayers about \$40,000 a year.

Voter rejection of the plan keeps alive a proposal to merge Whitestown's four village departments with the town force — an idea that's been gathering dust for the past three years. Such a merger is supported by a 2008 study by the Center for Governmental Research in Rochester that determined it could lower costs significantly. The study suggested three models for consolidating, the most basic of which would lower net operating costs by approximately 14 percent, or more than \$220,000.

Whitestown Supervisor Chuck Gibbs said earlier this year that his town still is willing to discuss the consolidation, but over the years, there has been resistance from the villages. The recent Yorkville vote is one indicator of that resistance.

Consolidating any government or agency — school districts, villages, towns or otherwise — is an extremely sensitive issue. It raises fears of lost identity, inferior services or other such travesty — most of which are unfounded.

But the reality of losing services will hit home in the very near future— if it hasn't already — if people aren't willing to accept change. Mohawk Central School District Superintendent Joyce Caputo, for instance, said recently that if her district were to opt out of the proposed merger with three other valley school districts, Mohawk would face a \$700,000 budget deficit — and that's after applying more than \$300,000 in savings.

Yorkville residents opposing the latest plan might be willing to pay what amounts to a few dollars more annually in taxes to keep their own officers, but that means cuts will need to be made somewhere else in the village operating budget — especially since leaders are handcuffed by the 2 percent tax cap. Sooner or later, it'll implode. By then, consolidation won't be an option. It'll be a necessity.

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