

Herkimer Co. seeks towns' interest in sharing road maintenance

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GateHouse News Service

Posted May 10, 2011 @ 10:00 PM

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Herkimer, N.Y. — It's in the mail.

Herkimer County Highway Superintendent Jay Ewanyk early this week mailed letters to area town officials soliciting input about their willingness to participate in a shared-services agreement with the county. Among the tasks that might be included in such an agreement is the mowing of county roads.

While not everyone has received their letters yet, at least two town supervisors have expressed interest in the proposition, adopting a wait-and-see stance until more information becomes available.

During a meeting of the Herkimer County Highways Committee late last week, committee members gave Ewanyk the go-ahead to send out the correspondence.

In essence, it asks town officials to weigh in on their interest in sharing services with the county for maintenance operations such as garbage and trash pick-up, pothole repair, road sweeping, mowing, ditching, sodding and removal of material from road shoulders, culvert replacement, brush removal and the like.

Additionally, county officials are hoping to gauge town officials' interest in taking part in a pilot program to establish a regional highway garage with at least one other town.

Ewanyk said, "This is just an inquiry if they're interested in it — a first step."

The establishment of eight regional highway garages was one of the long-term recommendations proposed in a recently completed study by Charles Zetek Jr., of the Rochester-based Center for Government Research.

As noted in the study's executive summary, Zetek conducted the county highway shared services/consolidation study for Herkimer County with the overarching goal of finding ways county and local governments "might be able to maintain roads and bridges within the county more efficiently."

As proposed, the regional garages would be located at existing town highway facilities.

The report was issued in April and is posted on the county's website at www.herkimercounty.org.

The study also provides a detailed inventory of facilities, equipment, machinery and manpower for the county's 19 towns, 10 villages, one city and the county highway departments.

The project was overseen by a study committee made up of representatives from the county legislature, town supervisors, town highway superintendents, village mayors, village Department of Public Works supervisors, the county administrator and the county highway superintendent, with data collection between fall 2009 and summer 2010.

Early this week, neither German Flatts Supervisor Frank Spatto nor town of Russia Supervisor Frances Donley was involved with the study; however both expressed interest in learning more about a shared-services proposal with the county.

As of Tuesday afternoon, neither official had had an opportunity to read the letter. Spatto said he had been involved with meetings during the day and Donley hadn't received it yet.

Currently, all of the towns have agreements with the county for snow and ice removal on county highways.

Although the terms of the snowplowing contract have never been high enough to cover all the towns' associated costs, Spatto said, "Without opening a can of worms, it's OK."

As one of the officials who negotiated the present snow-and-ice-removal agreement, he said, "We're doing the best we can."

Before he'd be ready to commit to a mowing contract with the county, he said he'd need to "see what the bottom line is and where the numbers are."

With regard to the town of Russia's potential participation in a shared services agreement for highway maintenance, Donley said, "I can't say we wouldn't be interested in mowing."

Currently, the town of Russia shares equipment with the neighboring towns of Norway, Ohio and Schuyler. Additionally, she said, "We work with the county quite a lot."

Donley said she and her fellow town council members are curious as to what the county would come up with.

Before they could commit to an agreement, though, Donley said details would have to be worked out about who would operate the equipment, who would be responsible for repairs and related costs, as well as fuel-related issues, insurance "and everything else that goes along with it."

The town of Russia does own mowing equipment, but she couldn't say whether it would hold up to the maintenance of every town and county road there. She thought the town's existing equipment might not be adequate.

During the county highway committee meeting Friday morning, committee Chairman Dennis Korce suggested town officials with equipment issues might consider the shared-services arrangement with the county as a way of paying for new mowers and such.

Additionally, Legislator Frederick Shaw asked if county-owned mowing equipment could potentially be rented to other municipalities.

Ewanyk said, "Long term, if you get all the towns to commit to [an agreement], yeah; but short-term, if you get one or two towns, no. We still have to mow. We still have to maintain the system."

He said one of the options would be to have a municipality upgrade its equipment.

Korce asked if the county would be entertaining agreements with municipalities for specific roads or projects, or if the agreement would be an ongoing one with all towns for all county roads.

"Would you cherry-pick a project?" he asked.

Ewanyk said, "In this case, we're talking about general maintenance. I would recommend they have to take all the roads. You start taking bits and pieces, and the accounting on that, just for that, would be a nightmare."

He continued, "This is primarily set up for just general maintenance. It isn't structured, at this point, for projects." As noted by the county committee members, potential benefits of the county's adoption of shared services agreements with the towns is more frequent maintenance of county highways and a reduction in the county department's workforce. "The thing that's going to be difficult is negotiating a price. We've been there before with the county snow contract. There's going to be negotiations. These towns may not want to do it for the price that we're doing it," Ewanyk said.

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