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Missouri Mayor Pitches Mercy Killing for Town

By Tim Jones - Sep 28, 2011

Carmen Wilkerson ran for mayor of [St. George](#), Missouri, this year with a pledge: Elect me and kiss our town goodbye -- all 10 streets, two businesses and one stoplight.

Wilkerson is asking voters to bury the three-decade-long heritage of a south St. Louis suburb best known as a speed trap that financed the salaries of unneeded police. The county should run the place, said Wilkerson, who views this as a municipal mercy killing of St. George, age 63, population 1,337, reputation checkered.

"The whole thing is just a waste of tax dollars," Wilkerson said in an interview at City Hall. "I just don't see any reason to go on."

The Nov. 8 vote on so-called disincorporation comes as cost pressures force municipalities to consider sharing services, merging with neighbors, or surrendering self-governance. The U.S. Census Bureau reported yesterday that property-tax collections -- the main source of income for cities and counties -- dropped 1.2 percent in the second quarter, the third-straight decline.

In November, New Jersey voters in the borough and township of Princeton will decide whether to merge. In Indiana, Muncie and Delaware County will consider consolidation next year. Voters in eight New York communities have voted to disincorporate since 2008, according to the Rochester-based [Center for Governmental Research](#), a nonprofit that advises local governments on consolidation.

'Terrible Reputation'

Driving these moves are the 18-month recession that ended in June 2009 and the housing slump, which depressed [tax revenue](#), said Charles Zettek, the center's vice president and director of government management services.

"Citizens are willing to say, 'Let's put ourselves out of business,'" Zettek said.

St. George is weighing what Zettek calls "the nuclear option."

Some residents want to avoid such a cataclysm. Alderwoman Nelda True said there's no pressing need to fold the tents.

"What's the big deal?" she said. "We've got a nice little city here."

St. George has an outside reputation for a small town. Until two years ago, a police force of 12 officers picked off drivers who exceeded the 30 mph limit on Reavis Barracks Road, near Imo's Pizza. Revenue from the tickets paid for the force and a municipal court, drawing notoriety to the community and tarring St. George with "a terrible reputation," said Alderwoman Tina Charpentier.

Confiscated Keys

After the village drew national attention on [YouTube](#) with a video showing an officer threatening a driver, the police department was disbanded in 2008 and the municipal court was closed this year. The county now provides police protection.

[City Hall](#) is an 800-square-foot gray paneled house with stained carpeting and 35 folding chairs formerly occupied by drivers challenging speeding tickets. The basement that housed the police department has a pile of confiscated car keys, file cabinets of court documents and wall shackles now covered by plastic electrical plates. The jail's holding tank now houses the town mascot, a figure of a knight in shining armor.

Wilkerson wondered why the town needs to maintain a government when it has no cops, no court and nothing to run except a snow plow.

In February, 500 people, representing 60 percent of registered voters, signed petitions proposing to turn the operation over to St. Louis County. Sixty percent of St. George voters would have to approve the measure.

Just One Snowplow

Governing St. George wouldn't amount to heavy lifting for the county, which has about 1 million residents and is the state's most populous. The town is less than half a square mile, with 750 structures, half of which are in a condominium complex, the other half single-story homes. It's what Wilkerson calls "a town for newlyweds and nearly dead." Twenty-six percent of the population is 60 or older.

The town owns a truck with a snow plow and shovels to fill potholes. No schools, no debt, no serious crime.

Former Mayor Mary Jo Fitzpatrick said she is puzzled by the move to disband and is convinced residents will wind up paying higher taxes for fewer services. She complained that Wilkerson called the town's supporters "village idiots."

"I don't think we're village idiots," Fitzpatrick said.

St. George would not be the first [Missouri](#) town to call it a day. Peerless Park, with about 50 residents, shut down in 1999, and Times Beach was disincorporated in 1985 and demolished in 1992 after dioxin contamination was discovered.

St. Louis County, which has 91 municipalities -- 70 with fewer than 10,000 residents -- has not taken a position on the St. George proposal, said spokesman Mac Scott. However, County Executive Charlie Dooley “believes there are communities that should be disincorporated. It would be better for the residents,” Scott said.

While the county executive “is a believer in small communities, that doesn’t mean that every single community is a viable entity,” Scott said.

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