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Risk and loss of local identity cited in failed consolidation tries

The thumbs down outcome of Thursday's four-school district merger vote in nearby Herkimer County is probably no surprise to residents in the villages of Whitesboro and Yorkville in Oneida County.

In separate balloting last year, Whitesboro residents voted down a proposal to dissolve the village while Yorkville voters rejected contracting with the Sheriff's Office for police services and, as a result, do away with the village department.

In both cases the result was overwhelmingly in favor of keeping the status quo.

While there's been much talk over the years about governmental consolidation and shared services, with the promise of resulting efficiencies and savings, such changes come slowly in the end.

"Those identity issues are important," said Kent Gardner, president of the Rochester-based Center for Governmental Research. He said the fear of losing local identity and connections can be a potent one.

He said another issue is perception and reality of benefits compared with risk.

"There's always risk when changing a governmental structure," he said.

On Thursday, residents of the Frankfort-Schuyler School District rejected by nearly a 2-to-1 margin a plan to merge with the Ilion, Mohawk and Herkimer districts. The other three districts voted in favor, but all four had to support the plan in order for it to move forward and take effect July 1. As a result, The four districts will continue to operate as separate entities, at least for the time being.

The three districts that voted for the merger can now consider a merger on their own.

Interest was high in the school merger vote. Turnouts were much higher than usual in all four districts than is normal for budget votes.

The vote by district was:

∫ Frankfort-Schuyler: 623 yes; 1,123 no.

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ζ Herkimer: 1,020 yes; 896 no.

ζ Ilion: 1,221 yes; 755 no.

ζ Mohawk: 980 yes; 570 no.

Had the straw poll passed, a second vote would have been held Feb. 29 for voters to make the final decision on whether to combine the districts — or not.

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