

10-22-15

Paving a path to the polls

By Joe Pruski

DeForest Times-Tribune

When the town of Windsor commissioned public finance firm Ehlers and Associates to explore the financial implications of a change in governmental structure it marked the first steps in a process that will culminate at the polls Nov. 3.

Senior Municipal Advisor Jim Mann of Ehlers, who was brought on in August of 2014, delivered a report last December that he said quantified the losses suffered by Windsor through annexation over the past 25 years. Mann reported that the 2,209 acres annexed during that period by the village of DeForest and city of Sun Prairie carried with it a value of nearly \$300 million - 50 percent of the town's total equalized value of \$614 million.

It was just after Mann made his presentation that, during a joint meeting, Windsor town chairman Bob Wipperfurth informed DeForest officials that the town was seriously considering incorporation.

The Ehlers report included estimates of the financial impact of a much-talked-about merger between Windsor and DeForest. Mann told the boards that a joint village made up of the two municipalities would force the new village to slash \$1.5 million to "hold Windsor residents harmless." Mann added that the tax rate for Windsor residents would likely go up while residents of DeForest would see a tax decrease.

Talk of a possible merger dates back well over a decade and has been something DeForest officials have long favored. Windsor officials have stated

See **WINDSOR**, page 7

WINDSOR

From page 1

publicly that a successful incorporation to a village does not preclude the possibility of future merger, but that any discussion after Windsor incorporates would be had on equal footing.

"There are philosophical differences in how we operate," Wipperfurth told the Times-Tribune during an interview in September. "That's not to say one is better than the other. We just operate and function differently."

Despite talk of a merger, the Nov. 3 referendum for Windsor residents will feature one question: "Shall the town of Windsor become a village?" Residents will choose between one of two boxes - "For a village," or "Against a village."

A GOAL IN SEARCH OF A PROCESS

Town of Windsor supervisors' first official action pertaining to a change in governance was a Jan. 15 resolution to proceed with incorporation. The resolution included a caveat: Incorporation planning will "proceed with continued due diligence to incorporate the Town, but only if the entire Town is able to incorporate as a village."

Town officials briefed by town attorney Connie Anderson had determined the only way to ensure that current boundary agreements

with neighboring municipalities would transfer to the town's successor (the village) would be if the entire town incorporated.

This put the town in conflict with the state mandated incorporation procedure run through the Department of Administration's Incorporation Review Board. The IRB had approved very few applications for incorporation since its inception, and those towns that it had approved were forced to pare down their proposed incorporated areas to meet standards set forth by the board.

The Times-Tribune reported extensively on the IRB process and the challenges Windsor would face by attempting to incorporate through the DOA.

This left Windsor with two options: First, they could pony up the \$25,000 application fee and put together an incorporation proposal to the IRB that could ultimately fail. Second, they could attempt to circumvent the state mandated route and lobby the legislature to change state law to provide a pathway for them to incorporate. Town supervisors chose the latter.

The town hired Madison based lobbyist Eric J. Petersen to help put language in the recently passed state budget that would provide the town a path toward incorporation. According to official reports made to the Government Accountability Board, Petersen was paid \$25,000 for 19.75 hours of work through June by the town of Windsor.

Petersen and Windsor represen-

tatives worked through state Rep. Keith Ripp's office to have language included in the budget, Ripp has confirmed. That language was submitted to the Joint Finance Committee through committee co-chair Rep. John Nygren and passed on a party line vote 12-4 on May 14.

While the committee's four democrats opposed the provision on merit saying that a non-fiscal item relating to a single community in the state did not warrant a place in the state budget, the plan to incorporate and the process in doing so also had a detractor in the village of DeForest.

DeForest hired a lobbyist of their own in an attempt to prevent Windsor's incorporation from proceeding in the legislature.

Village of DeForest president Judd Blau told the Times-Tribune at the time that he was firm in his belief that a merger would best represent the communities. He also criticized the process by which Windsor was able to have favorable language included in the budget.

The protest fell on deaf ears, however, when following several months of delays in the state budgeting process legislators in both chambers passed the budget bill and sent it to Gov. Scott Walker who signed it on July 12.

The town was now a referendum away from becoming a village.

"THE ONLY WAY"

In spite of the hoopla surrounding Windsor's path to the brink of incorporation, Wipperfurth insists

the town's method of incorporation was "the only way" forward.

The town was steadfast in its commitment that any future change in governmental structure would preserve current cooperative boundary agreements with neighboring communities - which it has.

"As time passes Windsor and other communities will be able to work together for the common good. We will be able to provide boarder agreements to neighboring townships. We will be able to work as equals with DeForest, Sun Prairie, and Madison," Sup. Don Madelung explained. "Windsor will be free at last to determine its own destiny."

Former town chairman Alan Harvey gave the actions of the current Windsor board an "A-plus."

"They have been transparent and communicated clearly that they wanted to seek incorporation and I don't think anyone should be surprised by this," Harvey said.

"They've really been working hard. The number of informational meetings that they're not only holding now, but over the last few years... and considering they have a lot of other business to conduct - I think they've really done a good job."

-Next week in our final story on Windsor's attempt to become a village ahead of the Nov. 3 referendum we will take a look at Windsor's future, and what effect the referendum will have on growth, policy, and town governance.