THE DEXTER LEADER

# Second town hall meeting addresses cityhood concerns

By Sean Dalton
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Last week's "Stepping into cityhood" town hall meeting was a resounding success from an attendance standpoint.

Whether it served its purpose is a subjective judgment to be made by those who attended it.

The proceedings started with a presentation by John Coy, former village president and chairman of the Cityhood Study Committee.

Much of what he talked about was a result of a report that the 18 members of the committee presented to the village in March 2007.

He discussed myriad advantages and disadvantages involved in becoming a city for the nearly 90 people who came from the village and surrounding townships to either speak their minds or simply listen.

One of the first facts Coy pointed out was that Dexter was the largest village in the state in terms of population, and of 273 cities in Michigan, Dexter was more populous than 133 of them.

"I'm sure a lot of you are struggling with a concern of how a city feels noisy, large and impersonal," Coy said. "After talking to Chelsea (which became a city in 2004), that really wasn't the case.

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Village officials say it's difficult to pinpoint all of the costs involved in the transition, which has just begun.

As of June 9, the village has spent $12,197 including attorney fees, materials for committee open houses and presentations, the services of consultant David Rutledge, and the first four steps of boundary surveys being conducted by village engineering firm Orchard, Hiltz & McCliment Inc. of Farmington Hills.

Coy also said the total boundary survey cost would be about $30,000 and overall the annual expense of being a city would be about $73,000.

He reiterated the positive aspects of the importance of being able to handle its own property tax assessments and appraisals and elections.

"The first thing that came up when we had discussion was not only (that) it makes financial sense, but we are ready to offer those services (that a city offers)," Coy said.

Coy and several members of the council went over the breakdown of taxes, as an illustration of why cityhood is a good deal for residents.

Residents of Westridge subdivision pay 3.6 mills to Webster Township in addition to 13.5562 mills to the village.

The rest of the village, which is technically in Scio Township, pays 1.45 mills plus village taxes.

Cityhood would come with a .25 mill "city tax" which would generate an estimated $139,000 in revenue to provide expanded services, or 25 cents for every $1,000 in taxable property value.

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Coy said that depending on whether one lives in Webster's or Scio's tax jurisdiction, homeowners stand to save from $120 to $700 per year, and businesses valued at $1 million could save more than $1,200 per year on average.

According to Coy, when he last checked he was told that Scio Township stood to lose the most in revenue at $243,000 per year, although he added that supervisors from both townships said with their projected growth the losses wouldn't interrupt township government or services.

Boundaries were a touchy subject throughout the meeting. Coy was adamant that the committee operated under the assumption that the city would be based on current village boundaries.

"We would be happy if the boundaries stayed exactly the way that they are," Coy said.

Scio Township resident William Bulley, who lives in the Bates Farms subdivision, was not convinced and brought up the specter of annexation under the 1981 Promulgation Agreement to be addressed by the board of trustees.

"Since you've stated here repeatedly that you have no intention of annexing us, could you once and for all put (the agreement) to rest?" Bulley said.

"Put a stake through it, because it's been hanging like a (sword of) Damocles over our heads. Why is the council intent on growing?"

Resident Jeff Surfris wanted it to be taken one step further by making it expressly clear in the charter that the city does not expand its boundaries in the future.

"I think (that's) one of the concerns that people have," Surfris said.

Village President Shawn Keough said that the council would look into the limitations and powers that can be granted in a charter, while council member Joe Semifero pointed out that annexation

member Joe Semifero pointed out that annexation is a voluntary process.

"Annexation happens when somebody comes to the village and requests (it)," he said.

Scio Township Supervisor Charlie Nielsen spoke up for the township's perspective.

"I don't think there's any township anywhere that relishes losing territory," he said. "But I am biased in favor of the township. That is my duty."

He did respond directly to one resident who said the township is spending 0.5 mills from Proposal J, a parks and land preservation millage, on projects too far away from the village to be used by village residents.

"Just as a matter of correction, we have used some of that money just outside of Dexter," Nielsen said. "We bought a conservation easement forever at Gordon Hall and we have other projects - one too early to speak about - that would be enjoyed by the village.

"You have gotten some value for the .5 mills."

Bulley also took the council to task for alleged compensation ambitions (trustees receive $80 per meeting and the village president receives $260 per meeting, for two meetings per month), as well as wanting "big-city offices" and increased staffs.

"Who is going to write the charter if you become a city?" Bulley asked.

Keough responded that a separate, elected body writes the city's charter, rather than the council at its own whim.

Semifero went a step further by pointing out that staffing levels in the village have been unchanged since 1992.

"The staffing is identical; in fact we had a manager retire," he said. "The village staff has done a great

"The staffing is identical; in fact we had a manager retire," he said. "The village staff has done a great job managing the budget, and they do a great job because that's what we've asked them to do.

"Our taxes have (also) been flat on a dollar rate. Whenever the dollar value goes up, the millage rate goes down."

Coy addressed some of the "disadvantages" of cityhood.

"In the official study report we didn't clearly define them as disadvantages," he explained.

Not being clear in that manner has caused significant backlash from skeptical residents at previous meetings and presentations.

"(City) residents would lose the ability to run for township office or vote in township elections,'" Coy said, among the chance of losing that "small-town feel," although he doesn't believe that to be a possibility.

"Having a sense of community doesn't happen by accident," he said. "There are lots of smaller towns that don't have that. The people that live in Dexter lends itself to having that kind of community.

"We've experienced double-digit growth over the last 10 years," Coy continued. "If we didn't lose our sense of community by now, changing our name to city isn't going to make it happen."

Some residents brought up the fear of a city income tax being levied, but Coy and council members explained how the city charter could work to prevent that.

"You could say 'no city income tax' in the charter, which you as residents vote on, so that's a pretty easily addressed concern," Coy said.

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