

VILLAGE OF HASTINGS-ON-HUDSON

CONSOLIDATION OF VOTING DISTRICTS

At the Board of Trustees meeting of Sept. 14, 2004, a proposal was presented to consolidate the eight voting districts in the Village into one district for March Village elections only, and to use one polling place: the Hastings Library Orr Room. The reasons for this change are described in the proposal below.

The Trustees have scheduled a public hearing on the proposal for Tuesday, Oct. 5, 2004 at 8:00 p.m. in the Meeting Room on the second floor of the Municipal Building. Please come and tell the Trustees what you think about it. You are also welcome to share your comments by mail, fax, or e-mail at the addresses below.

Susan Maggiotto
Deputy Village Manager/Village Clerk
7 Maple Avenue
Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706
(914) 478-3400 ext. 611
FAX: (914) 478-4624
smaggiotto@hastingsgov.org

A PROPOSAL TO CONSOLIDATE VOTING DISTRICTS IN THE VILLAGE OF HASTINGS-ON-HUDSON SEPTEMBER, 2004

The Village is divided into eight voting districts that use six polling places for Village elections.

This is a proposal to consolidate the eight districts into one district for March Village elections only, and to use one polling place: the Hastings Library Orr Room. Following are the reasons for this recommendation and discussion of related issues.

Disability Accessibility

The American Legion on Farragut Avenue is the location of two polling places and is not handicapped accessible. Although persons with disabilities can vote by absentee ballot, an attorney for the plaintiffs in a federal lawsuit seeking to force the Board of Elections to make all polling places accessible by the

presidential election on Nov. 2 recently argued, "It is the cornerstone of our right as citizens to be able to go to the polls."

The Orr Room is handicapped accessible. Voters can park behind the Municipal Building and use the elevator to access the Orr Room.

Cost

Estimated cost savings are \$4,355, a 56% budget reduction. The major savings is in personnel costs; 12 election inspectors and one captain would suffice, versus 32 and 8 needed currently. The election could be conducted with three voting machines instead of eight, with cost savings in both the rental and delivery of the machines. The rental fees paid to several of the polling places would be eliminated. There would be a modest reduction in supplies cost.

Staffing

The pool of election inspectors is dwindling and replacements are difficult to find. Inspectors must be available to work a 13 hour day beginning at 6:30 a.m. and ending at 9:30 p.m. There is no provision in the law for the sharing of the day between two persons.

A consolidated polling place would require 12 persons to staff: one inspector at each of the eight roster books, one at each of the three voting machines, and one person at the door to direct voters to the correct book to sign.

Efficiency

Eight polling places in six buildings are difficult for the Village Clerk to monitor at the critical times of the opening and closing of the polls. A consolidated polling place would ensure that any problems could be addressed immediately. Election results would be available more quickly.

Bilingual Directive

The Village, along with other municipalities in Westchester County, received a letter dated February 27, 2004 from the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York with the following statement:

"On September 18, 1992, Westchester County became a covered political subdivision subject to Section 203 [of the Voting Rights Act] with respect to the Spanish language. Thus, Westchester County is required to provide ballots, announcements, and publicity in Spanish, including assistance at the polls on election day to the extent it is required for meaningful electoral participation. The provisions of Section 203 apply to all municipalities, school districts

and other governmental units within Westchester County, including Hastings-on-Hudson."

We can readily comply with bilingual ballots etc., but if we were directed to provide, for example, interpreters at the polling places, it would be difficult to comply at six locations.

Loss of Use of Facility

Two districts, the 18th and the 22nd, use the James Harmon Community Center. The Center is scheduled for demolition in the spring of 2005. Parks and Recreation Superintendent Ray Gomes stated that he plans to vacate the premises by early March, 2005, and anticipates that it will take a year for the new building to be completed. This means that it will be necessary to find alternate locations for two districts for two years. This accommodation could be made, but it is an additional consideration to keep in mind.

Accommodations

Parking for voters would be adequate as a number of spaces in the parking lot behind the municipal building could be designated as voter parking only. Commuters would find it convenient to vote either in the morning or the evening. The senior van could be used to transport voters as necessary. The Orr Room can accommodate the tables and voting machines. The downstairs area is well designed to handle the flow of voters even at the busiest times.

Election Law

Village Election Law §15-110 provides that a village shall constitute a single election district for village elections. It authorizes the Board of Trustees to change the number of election districts by resolution provided that no district contains more than eight hundred qualified voters. It further defines qualified voters as the average of the number of persons who voted in the three preceding village elections.

As of March 5, 2004, there were 5,262 registered voters in the Village of Hastings-on-Hudson. Of that number, 169 voted in the March Village elections. The previous year, in a contested election, 1,332 persons voted. In 2002, 211 persons voted. The average number of voters in the last three years is 571. Therefore, the Board of Trustees has the authority to combine the Village into one election district containing not more than 800 qualified voters as defined in the law.

Conduct of the Election

In general elections in November, votes are tallied according to the eight election districts. If the proposed change is implemented for the Village elections in

March, votes would be tallied as one district. However, the roster books for voter signature that are provided by the Westchester County Board of Elections are prepared according to election district, so voters would sign in according to district. Tables would be set up in the Orr Room with the number and name of each voting district clearly marked. There would be one common line for voters who would then approach their voting district table to sign the roster book. Three voting machines would be in use. One election inspector would be stationed at the door to direct voters uncertain about their district to the correct table.

It is anticipated that voters could be accommodated without undue wait time. School district elections are conducted in one location, the Cochrane Gym. School District Clerk Nancy Caruso stated that at the peak time of voting - 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. - there are five or six voters maximum waiting to sign each book. Two villages with comparable populations, Pleasantville and Croton-on-Hudson, each have consolidated into one election district. The village clerks in both places report no problems. The following is from the Village Election Summary of the clerk of Croton-on-Hudson after the 1996 consolidation:

"I think overall the consolidation worked very well and particularly saved a great deal of time from visiting each polling place, delivering supplies, and running back and forth each time a polling place had a problem....The alleged problem of parking never happened. As I monitored the Community Room throughout the day, and particularly at rush hour, there were never more than 5-6 people on a line at a time....One thing that caused a bit of confusion since there was only one district, people tended to congregate and talk and some people actually said to me that they 'saw people they hadn't seen in years.' "

Results of the election will be reported as a single district instead of eight separate districts. However, inspectors will still maintain a triplicate list of persons who have voted by district that can be given to poll watchers.

Schedule

Village election law §15-110 states that any change to voting districts can be done by resolution, and that any resolution shall be adopted at least 120 days prior to the general Village election. A target date for a vote on the proposed change would be Oct. 19, 2004.

A public hearing is not required. However, because this change would affect every registered voter, a full discussion should be facilitated. The proposal will be widely disseminated during September, with Board discussion possible on September 14 and 21, and October 5.

Summary

As the Village Clerk responsible for conducting the past seven elections, it has long been my opinion that the Village ought to consolidate voting districts for the reasons detailed above; the proposal was not made because there was no suitable location. Now the Library Orr Room is available. This is an ideal site for Village elections in terms of location, access, and workability. The lower level of the library is well-designed to manage even large numbers of people efficiently. I believe that voters will find voting to be not only convenient but pleasant in this environment.

Beyond efficiency and economy, however, my greater concern is maintaining control over eight polling places and 32 election inspectors. I am on tenterhooks from 6:30 a.m. when the inspectors arrive at the polls, until 9:30 p.m. or 10:00 p.m. when the last captain submits the official return. We have been fortunate that there have been no major incidents in recent years, for example, a malfunctioning machine, or a contested outcome. But the unexpected snowstorm last March was a vivid reminder of how precarious the situation is. Some inspectors wanted to close the polls early. Some did leave early. Many were nervous throughout the day and had to be driven home by police officers.

I have never witnessed the closing of the polls as I must await the reports in my office. It would be far preferable to be present at this critical time. Results would be heard, and recorded, immediately.

It is my recommendation that the Village consolidate its eight election districts into one district for general Village elections, effective for the March 15, 2005 election.

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