

# Sunday exclusive: Early lessons from the Seneca Falls consolidation

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Seneca Falls: A village dissolved: Seneca Falls, a village dissolved. Early lessons from the Seneca Falls consolidation. Video by Shawn Dowd

Written by **BENNETT J. LOUDON**  
Staff writer

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Only about four months have passed since the 180-year-old village of Seneca Falls ceased to exist, but the largest village dissolution in New York state may provide some critical lessons for other municipalities.

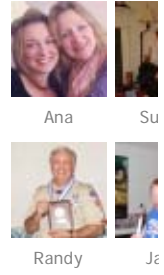
Residents voted about two years ago to let their municipality be absorbed by the town of the same name, and that transition period has revealed the difficulties of a virtually unprecedented task.

“They said they were going to maintain the same level of service to us and I have to say so far, so good,” said Sherry Laney, owner of

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Seneca Falls police patrol the heart of the old village in Seneca Falls earlier this month. With the dissolution of the village, officers now patrol the entire town. The alternative was to go with sheriff and State Police patrols. / SHAWN DOWD / staff photographer

### Seneca Falls

The community is best known as the birthplace of the women's rights movement with the first Women's Rights Convention held there in 1848. It also is widely believed to be the inspiration for the fictional Bedford Falls in the classic holiday movie *It's a Wonderful Life*.



Some of the most popular attractions in Seneca Falls are:

- A** Women's Rights National Historical Park, which includes a visitors center at 136 Fall St., and the adjacent Wesleyan Chapel, site of the first Women's Rights Convention.
- B** Elizabeth Cady Stanton House, 32 Washington St.
- C** National Women's Hall of Fame, 76 Fall St., founded in 1969. A total of 247 women are in the hall, where induction ceremonies are held every two years.
- D** Cayuga Lake State Park, 2678 Lower Lake Road, on Cayuga Lake, as a swimming beach, camping sites, cabins and a picnic area.

The Seneca Falls Heritage Area includes the central business district, the harbor on the Seneca-Cayuga Canal and several architecturally interesting and historic sites. The Heritage Area's Visitor Center at 89 Fall St. provides an overview of local history and includes an interactive exhibit gallery.

KEVIN M. SMITH/GRAPHICS EDITOR

### About Seneca Falls

Sherry's Bear and Frame Shop at 67 Fall St., who voted against dissolution.

With Gov. Andrew Cuomo pushing for such consolidations to eliminate layers of government and reduce the tax burden on property owners, the experience of a community like Seneca Falls is especially important for other places considering a similar change.

Scott Sittig, a researcher for the Center for Governmental Research, is hoping the dissolution of Seneca Falls will better prepare other communities considering the idea.

"It's so new, and there are so few communities that have gone through it, I don't think everybody anticipated what all the issues were going to be," Sittig said.

### Example for others

Several Rochester-area communities have discussed possible dissolution. Voters in Brockport and Macedon, Wayne County, have rejected the idea, while the city and town of Batavia in Genesee County are considering a merger. Since 1921, a total of 43 villages in New York have dissolved, including Seneca Falls and five others since 2008.

Most of the other villages that dissolved had fewer than 1,000 residents. For example, Perrysburg, Cattaraugus County, had a population of 380 when it dissolved in 2010, while the town of Perrysburg has about 1,200. And Pike, in Wyoming County, had a population of 382 when it dissolved in 2008. The town of Pike had a population of about 800.

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- National Women's Hall of Fame, 76 Fall St., was founded in 1969. A total of 247 woman are in the hall, where induction ceremonies are held every two years.
- Cayuga Lake State Park, 2678 Lower Lake Road, on Cayuga Lake, has a swimming beach, camping sites, cabins and a picnic area.
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**Before and after**

Now that the village of Seneca Falls has dissolved, former village residents are paying a lot less in property taxes.

	Former village	Former town	New townwide
Property tax rate per \$1,000 assessed value	\$16.93	0	\$3.96
Quarterly minimum water and sewer fee (up to 1,200 cubic feet)	\$76	\$114	\$123.50
Cost per cubic foot after 1,200 cubic feet	.0289 cents (water and sewer)	.0434 cents (water and sewer)	.0360 cents (water); .0576 cents (sewer)



The population of the former village of Seneca Falls was about 6,600. The town outside the former village boundaries had about 2,500 residents.

“Now having a community the size of Seneca Falls go through it, it is now a better process. I think there were some lessons learned as part of the Seneca Falls process that would be helpful to a lot of communities,” Sittig said.

State officials and Seneca Falls residents say communication and teamwork between the outgoing village officials and the town government is crucial. While studies and transition plans are a sensible tool in any consolidation effort, they are not binding documents and cannot guarantee the true financial impact of a consolidation.

In addition, local leaders also must recognize the lame-duck status of a village government on the brink of dissolution. After a vote to dissolve, their actions will have a limited lifespan and they are often ineligible for grant money, Seneca Falls officials said.

And even as the experience of others can be helpful, all communities are unique, and their special circumstances, especially unusual revenue sources and the distribution of the population, should not be overlooked.

**Tax relief**

Last year, the town of Seneca Falls had a budget of about \$5.5 million. Now it's \$11 million. Before the dissolution, property owners outside the village paid no town property tax, largely because of revenue generated by the Seneca Meadows landfill.

Now residents of the former village area pay about \$455 in property tax on a \$100,000 home, which is a major decrease. Residents in

the area outside the village will pay about \$400 for a home of the same value. The difference is due to old debt obligations that are being paid separately by town and village residents.

Residents throughout the town also pay a fee for fire protection and trash removal. And some residents pay other fees for special district services, depending on where they live.

Water and sewer fees have increased for all residents. Former village officials blame the increase partly on water and sewer department staffing changes initiated by town officials. Town officials said they discovered the need for additional fund reserves and facility improvements when they took over.

The Town Board has hired a consultant to do a comprehensive inventory and analysis of all assets to determine what may need to be repaired and replaced. Former village officials insist they provided town officials with a thorough status report before they left.

The town also continues to wrestle with a decision over where town offices will be permanently located. Since being forced out of the 10 Fall St. building in 2004 because of an arson fire, town offices have been housed at three temporary locations — the town community center; the old library building, which they had to leave when it was sold; and the current location, a former Catholic elementary school building at 81 W. Bayard St. that costs the town \$90,000 a year in rent.

In the eight years since the fire, town officials have pitched three separate ideas for a new home. Voters rejected the most recent proposal to settle the issue when they voted 481 to 433 against spending most of the \$2.5 million in a reserve account to renovate the 10 Fall St. building and move back there. Town officials considered using the old village hall, but it's not big enough, Supervisor Don Earle said.

### **Police services key**

Also still casting a shadow over the transition is the fate of the Seneca Falls Police Department.

The town's options after dissolution included disbanding the department, which now has an annual budget of about \$950,000, and relying mainly on the Seneca County Sheriff's Office and State





Police or establishing a police district that would cover only the former village area.

“The Police Department was a hot topic,” said Chief Stuart Peenstra.

From Jan. 1 through the end of March, Peenstra said he has saved \$17,371 by using part-time officers instead of paying overtime, despite a major increase in calls.

In the first three months of this year, the department handled 1,936 calls, compared to 633 calls in the same time period in 2011.

The department has 11 full-time officers, the same as before, but now the chief also has seven part-timers. So far, Peenstra, who had been a sergeant and a shift supervisor until former chief Frederick Capozzi retired at the end of 2011, has managed to make what many consider improvements to the department without spending more money.

Peenstra has started the process of seeking state accreditation for his department. Officers now have wireless Internet access in patrol cars so they can do paperwork on the road, stay in the public view and cut down on office work at the end of their shifts.

The department bought one new vehicle with about \$35,000 in state grant money, and Peenstra applied for a second grant to buy another car, which he hopes to have by the end of the year.

The department also got a \$15,000 state grant for new office computers.

Peenstra also is getting tasers for his officers. They now have one, and he has ordered 11 more. He also plans to use grant money to buy new portable radios to replace the 10-year-old models now in use.

“I am doing my absolute best to seek a grant for everything,” Peenstra said.

Eventually, Peenstra is hoping his department can expand into part of the building at the current location that used to house the village offices.



## Police pay cut

Peenstra's cost-saving measures have been aided by an average pay cut of \$2 per hour for officers. Of the town's 75 or so employees, only the police are unionized. The police union was disbanded when the village dissolved, but has since been reinstated, although the members are working without a contract and there are no plans to push for negotiations, said union president Sgt. Timothy Snyder, a former Town Board member.

"That was what the town offered us. We were all called into the town one at a time and they gave us the proposal to be town employees. We, as members of the union, decided not to negotiate a contract," Snyder said.

In addition to a pay cut, police officers lost numerous benefits. Under their contract with the village, officers were entitled to 90 days of sick pay at retirement. Without action by the village, that would be lost after dissolution. But the village faced the possibility that the officers might use those sick days before the village was dissolved.

Village officials agreed to pay for 18 sick days if officers didn't use any before dissolution.

"We didn't have a choice. We could accept the pay that was being offered to us. We had no negotiating powers. We had to accept what they were offering or we could go someplace else," Snyder said.

"We could request to negotiate. The sense of the members is they don't want to negotiate right now," he said.

## A divided community

With the dissolution proposal passing in March 2010 by only 86 votes — 1,198 to 1,112 — the Seneca County community best known as the home of the women's rights movement was almost evenly divided on the issue.

"I'm a downtown business merchant, and it just seemed as if we were losing a little bit of identity," said Laney.

Lois Jensen, a resident of the former village and co-owner of Seneca Office Products, 59 Fall St., said she hasn't seen any



changes since the dissolution, except for a bigger water bill.

"I think in the long run it won't be noticeable. It's kind of too bad that a village that's been around forever isn't going to be here any more," said Jensen, who declined to say how she voted.

"I was kind of hoping it wouldn't happen. My opinion is the prices on things are going to go up no matter what they say," Jensen said.

Even with a detailed transition plan, there were no guarantees about what would happen after the village dissolved.

"It was a plan, not a mandatory step-by-step. It made a lot of suggestions, but ultimately, at the end of the day, it is the authority of the town to adopt what is the best for the town as we go forward," said Earle.

"You really can't bind the future government to anything in that regard. If there was a plan, it just doesn't have a lot of teeth, or didn't have a lot of teeth once the village is gone. You don't have anybody necessarily in place to enforce it," Sittig said.

If residents don't like the way the town implements the transition, elected officials are vulnerable to a voter backlash. "That's the democratic part of the process," Sittig said.

Former town supervisor Peter Same, a village resident defeated by Don Earle in the November 2011 election, said he tried to remain neutral before the dissolution vote, but he voted for it.

"I saw an ineffective village government that was doing things irrationally and out of control," Same said.

"I think the residents will see the benefits and hopefully, over time we'll be able to jell as one community and stop some of the bantering back and forth," he said.

Although studies done before the vote expected that village residents would save as much as 48 percent in taxes, and they have saved more than that so far, Earle said he can't be sure how things will work out in the long run.

"The bottom line is we don't know. But do we foresee it going so much that way that we're going to regret it, being dissolved? I don't



see it that way at all,” Earle said.

Diana Smith, the first and last woman to serve as mayor when the village was disbanded, and an opponent of dissolution, said Earle’s optimism is part of his job.

“As a community leader, one of the things you do is maintain the community spirit. You don’t want to be naysaying and expressing things in a negative air,” she said.

After the vote, Smith and the entire village government were essentially lame ducks for the subsequent 21 months until the village was dissolved. They couldn’t apply for state grants, and state officials had no answers for how to handle important transition questions.

Village officials didn’t neglect their responsibilities, such as infrastructure repairs and maintenance, but they were unable to do many things without state help and funding.

For example, village officials anticipated increased water rates, but town officials recommended that they wait until after the transition. In the past, town residents paid 150 percent of what village residents paid. With the dissolution, all town residents pay the same rate.

Town Board member Emil Bove, who favored dissolution, said a judgment about how it has been handled ultimately will be decided by the residents, likely at the ballot box.

“I think it was a success, and I think it was a good thing,” Bove said. “I think it’s just going to be a matter of hearing from the people about it, just like any other government.”

**[BLOUDON@DemocratandChronicle.com](mailto:BLOUDON@DemocratandChronicle.com)**  
**<http://twitter.com/BennettLoudon>**



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