

Reps Dolan and Houghton – 1.19.2022 H.491 Testimony.

Thank you for your time today. I will be providing the joint testimony for Rep. Dolan and I, then we are both happy to answer questions.

H.491 is a charter change to establish the City of Essex Junction. I think it is important for us to review how we've come to this place and why 88% of those who voted want an independent community.

As a brief reminder, since 1892 the Village of Essex Junction has operated as a municipal unit of government within the Town of Essex – both chartered municipalities. Our communities have been voting on some form of merger or separation since 1958. I will spare you the details between 1958 and 2000.

- In 2000 a 5-month long Government Operations mandated mediation process ended with no agreed-upon resolution.
- In 2006 a yearlong community led task force created a charter for a new merged municipality. It passed narrowly - with Town outside the Village voting no and village voting yes. A revote overturned the results.
- Over the next 10 years the boards worked collaboratively to find shared services, then in 2018 created a subcommittee to again craft a plan for the future of our two communities. This is the Plan of Merger vote we will discuss shortly and that failed.
- And here we are today with our charter change request that creates a path forward for both communities, while fully recognizing the past history of efforts.

Last year the Town of Essex was before this committee with a charter change to establish a 3+3 governance model. At the time, the decision was made to hold further discussions until the community held the merger vote that had long been planned.

The merger plan we voted on in 2021 included the 3+3 governance model and a 12-year financial phase in to limit the immediate financial impact to Town outside the village residents. I want to be clear – the merger plan included the 3+3 governance model that was before this committee last year – passed in an earlier vote by Town outside the Village but failed in the Village.

Close to 50% of registered voters participated in the Plan of Merger held in March 2021. The Plan of Merger failed in the Town outside the Village by 72% and passed in the Village by 81%. Overall, the vote failed by 19 votes.

With swift action by residents throughout the communities we had a revote on April 13th. Over 50% of registered voters participated in this election. Again, the Plan of Merger failed with similar percentages within each community as the original vote – Town outside the Village voted no, the Village voted yes.

With broad community outreach, 3+3 governance and a 12-year financial phase in – the Town of Essex outside the Village overwhelmingly rejected the plan of merger – twice.

As part of the revote Village residents also voted on a non-binding resolution to have the Village Trustees draft a charter to establish the City of Essex Junction should the plan of merger fail a second time. That non-binding vote passed overwhelmingly.

The City of Essex Junction Charter vote was held by special Village meeting in November 2021. Again, close to 50% of registered voters participated – the charter passed with 88% of the vote – 3,070 yes to 411 no votes.

Equity in taxation has been a driving factor behind our decades long community discussion and votes. It was clearly stated through public outreach that should merger not pass; separation would mean an increase in municipal taxes to residents in the Town outside the Village. In fact, at a joint municipal meeting on September 28, 2020, the Town Finance Director at the time said “There are inequities in the way government is funded in our current situation. Village taxpayers are paying for services they are not eligible to receive and are paying more for services that they and TOV taxpayers have equal access to. This means that TOV taxpayers are paying less than the true cost for some services.”

In May of 2021 the two municipal boards entered into a joint resolution to investigate an amicable separation. As written in the resolution - “Members of the selectboard and Trustees agree to negotiate in good faith throughout the amicable separation process. In the spirit of inclusion, all voices will be respectfully heard and considered.”

Rep. Dolan and I have watched and engaged in the process and believe that the Trustees and Selectboard worked collaboratively to establish a transition plan that could be as fair as possible for both communities.

It is time for our two communities, who have tried almost every conceivable relationship, to have the opportunity to thrive as two separate entities for the betterment of all residents. Rep. Dolan and I know both communities can and will thrive.

Thank you