

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Senior Civics Columnist

To Alter or to Abolish or...

“... Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed... it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes...”
– Declaration of Independence (1776)

The concept of “*The People*” is central to every level of organized representative democratic government and to each body politic that ordains it. *The People*, collectively, is a singular entity with perpetual existence, for as long as the citizens who comprise *The People* of a Nation, State, County, Town, City, or Village find it in their common interest to remain distinctly organized as such.

As Noah Webster said, “A People cannot divest themselves of the sovereignty,” nor should it be subject “to the encroachments of [its] more powerful neighbor.” A Hamlet of Ellenville will be divested of sovereignty; oh, the buildings and streets and “people” will remain, but *THE People of Ellenville* will not. Simply put, I don’t want *The People of Wawarsing* making *The People of Ellenville* – as a distinct and sovereign body politic – “vanish.”

The Village of Ellenville Board, acting on the responses to a survey it sent out, has decided to establish a committee to study the pros and cons of dissolution of the Village’s government. The committee will have no inherent power, but will exhume previous Ellenville studies (and update old numbers), and consider what similar communities have done or discovered. It will also seek input from citizens of the Village and Town, review all the data, and report its findings to the Board and the community.

Although the committee has not been finalized, several interested members of the community have volunteered to serve, and, perhaps, there will be one member each from the Village and Town boards; although the Town has no official say in the matter, dissolution would impact Wawarsing in a big way, so the Town’s input and involvement is more than a mere courtesy. Presumably, Village employees will not be allowed to serve on the committee, though many will likely be part of the fact-finding process, directly or as witnesses questioned by the committee.

I have put my own name forward as a volunteer for the committee, and the Board seemed OK with that at its April 14 meeting.

Now, if you read my previous column, you know I start with a bias against dissolution, based on: (1) my belief – partly from logic, partly from what others who’ve studied the matter have learned – that savings are likely to be minimal; and (2) a fundamental civic principal that says sovereignty of *The People of the Village* should not be surrendered to those who do not have direct involvement in Village concerns.

But to create a committee made up only of those who are pre-disposed to come out against dissolution, no matter what a complete and objective study might reveal, would be a cynical waste of time, and a

disservice to the community; likewise, if such a committee ignores the data that favors dissolution, and cherry-picks only the input that would argue against it. Better that every member lays out his or her biases and beliefs at the start, so there can be no claim of hidden agendas or whitewashes, which can best be overcome when the completed findings are measured against their initial, pre-investigation hypotheses.

However, if, after all that research and review, the committee only decides to support the status quo, and simply report and depart (until the next generation, presumably, feels obliged to repeat the same futile exercise), it squanders a unique opportunity.

Recently, local businessman Dwight Coombe suggested at a Town Board meeting that a select joint committee of Village and Town stakeholders be convened to review all Village and Town functions and expenses to see where things could be made more efficient, most appropriately-funded, jointly-handled, handed-over, or even turned-off... whatever best serves the greater public weal.

Might I suggest, even before the committee meets, that it consider expanding its role to include Dwight’s concept, and, perhaps, even look at other productive alternatives to either dissolution OR maintaining the status quo?

Why not outline what a joint Village-Town Development Office would look like, what it would focus on, and where it could take the Village and Town *together*? Yes, I know that the Village’s LDC has apparently contracted a grant-writer to expend six months to draft requirements and goals that could be just as easily lifted from any number of economic development websites in a matter of minutes; no, I’m suggesting that informed stakeholders brainstorm what it is that WE need and would want HERE, specific to OUR situation and assets.

Why not look at the advantages Ellenville could gain by becoming a CITY? (Size is not a factor; New York’s city of Sherrill has only 3000 population, and only had 2200 when it incorporated as a city.) A city would be able to keep ALL its own sales tax, NOT have to pay town taxes, and has a leg up on certain grants and funds not otherwise available. I have suggested before that those areas around Ellenville (up to and including Napanoch to the north, down to Kelly’s Field to the south) might wish to join that city, to take advantage of police protection and Ellenville’s water supply, for example. All that is needed is to draft a viable city charter, market it towards a successful referendum, and submit it to the state legislature; neither the Town nor County can veto it IF *The People of what’s now Ellenville* (and those who wish to join the new City) desire to “alter” its government or even “to institute new government...”

Instead of constant finger-pointing, blame-laying, snubbing, and face-spiting-nose-cutting, maybe a convocation of *non-officials* can enter where elected officials fear to tread, and consider options that best effect the desires and welfare of *The People of BOTH* the current Town and Village, even if it means establishing a NEW entity or NEW arrangements or structures, and “organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.” Surely, there are enough existing working models to consider adopting, or even new and more modern outside-the-box ideas appropriate for these new and uncertain times.