

## McKownville: News And Comment

A busy week!

The McKownville picnic is tomorrow, Saturday, Aug. 22, from noon on at the university softball field behind Norwood St. games, raffles, bake sale, no open fires, lots of neighbors, save your rain dancing until Sunday.

The referendum on the merger of the Westmere and McKownville Water Districts will take place next Wednesday, Aug. 27, from 4 to 10 p.m. Voting for McKownville District residents will take place at the McKownville Fire House and for Westmere District residents at the Westmere Fire House. To be eligible to vote you must be a registered voter and a property owner in the appropriate district.

What follows are my own views of what the issues are in this merger.

The Westmere Water District would appear to be little affected by the merger. The Westmere District serves property with several times the assessed valuation of the McKownville District. The merger will add perhaps 20 percent to the tax base of the Westmere District, useful if the district needs to raise money by selling bonds.

The McKownville District is financially strong. The merger will make no difference in the ability of the Westmere District to supply water to its customers — the district already supplies McKownville with its water. As for taxes, the owner of a \$45,000 home in Westmere would pay around \$1 per year more in taxes with merger than without.

A Westmere voter will be choosing between saving \$1 or so per year and getting a district with a stronger financial base which is desired by Town government.

McKownville voters have much more complicated problems. For them, merger relates to the short and long term adequacy of the water distribution system, fire-fighting, the future of the McKownville Reservoir, and a host of more subtle issues. These include an accumulated distrust of Town Hall, fanned by Crossgates, which has led to the village movement, and a history of coolness between some members of the McKownville Improvement Association and some members of the McKownville Fire Department, which was recently aggravated by the Fire Commissioners' declaration of a mass resignation if the village comes to fruition, and the Improvement Associate's endorsement of the referendum on the water merger. The Fire Commissioners wanted the merger to go through without a referendum.

In this kind of atmosphere, the question of the merger has become rather complex, involving emotions, judgments of motives, and loyalties, as well as facts.

Here are reasons for supporting the merger:

Merging the district makes administration of the merged district easier than administration of the two districts separately.

Merger creates a single district with a broader tax base than either of the two separately. It creates a district whose financial resources are much stronger than McKownville's, and which can respond much more easily to perceived inadequacies in the system. Since McKownville's system is much older than Westmere's, many of the most serious inadequacies of the merged system will be in McKownville, and as a result, McKownville is likely to benefit from merger by a more rapid upgrading of its distribution system than would be possible using its own resources.

The fire department particularly supports the merger because it is most acutely aware of inadequacies of the distribution system which it has found. McKownville's system contains mostly four and six inch pipes, whereas Westmere feeds McKownville with an eight inch pipe. The smaller pipes cause loss of pressure and a lower rate of flow of water. The flow is adequate for fighting residential fires, but is below optimal standard for commercial fire protection. The two locations of particular concern are 1450 Western Avenue and the Ramada Inn. The McKownville Fire Department can call upon equipment which could generate sufficient water to meet optimal commercial standards, but the equipment cannot be used at capacity because of low pressure in the pipes.

The fire department supports installation of several additional connections between the McKownville and Westmere systems as a way of increasing pressure. Without merger, these connections would have to be metered, and the department views the extra cost for meters as a waste of money. Additional connections also insure adequate water even in case of a serious break in the system. At present a major break in the area of the Vineyard Restaurant could cut off water to most of the District.

The Fire Department supports preservation of the reservoir and opposes Crossgates, and feels that its substantial influence can insure preservation of the reservoir after merger.

Opponents of merger are primarily motivated by concern for the future of the McKownville Reservoir. Their arguments are of two kinds.

One is the feeling that merger will make it more likely that the reservoir will be abandoned as a possible future source of water, declassified, and sold. Many resi-

dents want the reservoir to be preserved from commercial exploitation, and kept as a recreation area and backup water source. This column presented those arguments in some detail last week.

The other argument against merger related to the reservoir involves the idea of a village. The village concept is rather controversial, and strongly opposed by the fire department. But in the event that a Village of McKownville comes to pass, then merger affects the assets the village will control. If the McKownville Water District is not merged into a consolidated district with Westmere, then with the formation of a village, the water district and, in particular, the reservoir, comes under the control of the village. Proponents of a village feel that the fate of the reservoir is much more secure if it is to be determined by a village board rather than the Town Board.

Some opponents of merger feel that the fire department has tended to overstate the urgency of the problems of the McKownville water system. They wonder if the merger is predominantly for the benefit of two or three commercial properties on the south side of Western Ave. They note that the Ramada Inn is within a short distance of the Albany water system, which can be tapped in an emergency. They wonder why the situation is suddenly perceived as so serious when the McKownville water pipes and the large commercial properties in McKownville have both been around for a number of years. They are concerned that all the activity regarding the McKownville Water District at this time is related to the desire of Crossgates to remove the Reservoir as an obstacle to development.

Someone with a tendency towards a conspiracy theory of government activity, and Capital District politics tends to breed such people in profusion could well wonder, why now? If the situation is so dangerous, why weren't the additional connections with the Westmere system made long ago? With all McKownville users on meters, why must the additional connections be metered — why not just compute the usage by adding up the user meters and adding a percentage for leakage and fire use?

The fact remains, however, that McKownville's system is an old system which would benefit by upgrading, and upgrading would most likely be more quickly and painlessly accomplished in a merged district than in an unmerged district. Offsetting this benefit is the possible risk that merger might more easily lead to a future loss of the McKownville Reservoir for public water and

This 1980 referendum passed, but the result was not published in the Altamont Enterprise

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recreational use, and merger might thereby help Crossgates and other commercial development in and near McKownville. Assessing the impact of merger on the reservoir is very difficult and speculative.

One final factor is that if the two districts do not merge, merger always remains possible. In fact, this will be the second merger vote in four years. But once the two districts are merged, reversal is inconceivable.

The McKownville Improvement Association at this writing has taken no position on the merger. It plans a public meeting on the merger question Tuesday, Aug. 26 at 8 p.m. at the Tom Sawyer Motor Inn.

Concerning last week's column on the reservoir, Town Board Member John Smircich pointed out that the Town never had any control over Harrington's Pond and had no power to have the dam rebuilt once it breached. He also suggested that even if the McKownville Filtration Plant equipment were capable of purifying the water to the standards of the 1960s, it would probably not be adequate today, since the standards for water purity have become more stringent since the equipment was last used.

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