

Mall foes say merger OK aids Crossgates,

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GUILDERLAND — Proponents of the merger of the Westmere and McKownville water districts say the \$85 million Crossgates Mall was not an issue in the merger vote, but opponents say the voters' approval of the merger is a victory for Crossgates.

McKownville and Westmere voters Wednesday night approved the merger of the two districts by only 65 votes, with 567 in favor and 502 against.

The merger, approved by the Town Board in July, was brought to a vote after residents petitioned.

After the election, Donald Reeb, a member of the board of directors of the

McKownville Improvement Association, said merger represented a victory for the Pyramid Crossgates Co., which plans to build a shopping mall in Guilderland.

"I think Crossgates won, but we don't know yet, other than Crossgates winning, how badly we're going to lose," Reeb said.

Another merger opponent, Lindsay Childs, who is a member of the McKownville Improvement Association, said opponents of the merger will have to wait until the end of this month to see whether attorneys for the Pyramid Crossgates Co. address the merger in legal briefs supporting construction of the mall.

Bruce Kenan, managing partner for

the proposed mall, said this morning the vote "has very little effect on us."

Contacted by a reporter at 8 a.m., Kenan said he had not been aware the merger was approved.

"I don't think our project was involved in the issue," he said. "The reservoir isn't a water supply and hasn't been for a long time."

Environmental hearings for permits for the mall were concluded last month, but briefs may still be submitted by attorneys. Kenan said he did not know whether the company would submit any briefs, noting, "The hearing was pretty exhaustive in its examination of all the topics."

The Pyramid Crossgates Co. must

receive permits before it can build in the reservoir's watershed and allow parking lot water pollutants to enter the reservoir.

Opponents of the merger felt consolidation of the two water districts would endanger the reservoir's status as legal water source for the area, which now receives water from Westmere.

Proponents of the consolidation, including Fred Abele, secretary of the Board of Fire Commissioners of the McKownville Fire Department, say consolidation will not endanger the reservoir.

Abele said the fire department, which ran a \$600 ad in the *Times-Union* and *The Knickerbocker News* urging



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but backers disagree

consolidation, did so with money raised from raffles, and not with public funds.

Another proponent of consolidation, Dennis Tyson, town superintendent of water and waste-water management and a Westmere firefighter, said consolidation will make it easier to fund needed improvements to the McKownville water system.

Tyson said, based on last year's tax figures, Westmere residents will pay 50 cents to \$1 more per \$1,000 of assessed property value in water district taxes after merger, and that McKownville residents will receive a decrease of \$5 to \$5.50 per \$1,000 a year.

This is not the first time the reservoir and water district have been the source of heated debate.

One woman, who cast her vote Wednesday night at the McKownville Fire Department, put it this way: "I've been in this town for 14 years, and I've cursed the water all this time."

The reservoir, unused since November 1973, was once the source of water for McKownville and the Three Hills Terrace area. The McKownville Water District was formed in 1949.

McKownville stopped using the reservoir in 1973, after a history of taste and odor problems including large amounts of iron that discolored plumbing and laundry.

Since that time, McKownville residents have debated the fate of the unused reservoir. In 1973, McKownville Improvement Association members protested and stopped the town's proposed sale of half an acre of reservoir

property to Stuyvesant Plaza for \$2,500. No public hearing was held, the members said, and the amount of money was "grossly insufficient."

In 1977, consolidation of the McKownville and Westmere water districts was proposed, and turned down by a narrow margin of McKownville voters in a referendum.

When plans for the proposed \$85 million Crossgates Mall became public in 1978, attention again centered on the reservoir because the mall would be built in a swampy area, once a pond, that is the watershed for the reservoir.

Members of the McKownville Improvement Association, and other groups that opposed the construction of the mall, said they saw the reservoir as a powerful tool in stopping the mall, since it would be unlawful to pollute the water, still classified as drinking water by the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

In March, Reeb, then president of the McKownville Improvement Association, proposed reactivating the unused reservoir.

Town officials, including Tyson, said it would cost \$600,000 to reactivate the unused treatment plant.

In June, members of the McKownville Fire Department called for consolidation of the Westmere and McKownville fire districts. "Fire flows" in the water district are poor, they said, and aerial trucks needed for the Ramada Inn and 1450 Western Ave. could not be used because of low water volume.