

Voters will decide how to choose town clerk

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Port Town Board agrees to hold November referendum to determine if office should be appointed instead of elected

Town of Port Washington residents will be asked this fall whether the town clerk should be appointed in the future.

The Town Board on Tuesday reviewed a proposed ordinance calling for the clerk's position to become appointed — a move that is becoming more common in townships.

A public hearing on the proposal will be held during the Tuesday, Sept. 7, Town Board meeting.

The matter will then be put to a referendum vote in November. If approved, it will take effect next spring, when Clerk Jennifer Schlenvogt's term expires.

Town Chairman Lee Schlenvogt said supervisors want to give residents plenty of time to weigh in on the proposal.

"We want to know how our residents feel about this," Schlenvogt said, adding the board deliberately decided to hold the referendum during the November election.

"We wanted a well-attended election so we know how our people feel about this," he said.

Schlenvogt said the board decided to look into appointing its clerk after longtime Clerk Susan Westerbeke resigned in mid-term this spring.

"Our hands were really tied on filling the position," he said.

The board had to appoint someone who was a town resident, and couldn't alter the pay to reflect the person's experience.

Finding a qualified person in a township of less than 1,700 people was a challenge, Schlenvogt said.

"A large number of those people have absolutely no interest in town government," and many are not qualified for the clerk's job, he said.

Five people applied to complete Westerbeke's term, which ends in April, but three of those applicants lived outside the town, Schlenvogt said.

Fortunately, the two remaining applicants were qualified, he added.

Jennifer Schlenvogt, who had been the town's chief election inspector for the past two years and a poll worker for five years, was unanimously appointed to fill the remaining year on Westerbeke's term.

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“We were very fortunate. It worked out,” Lee Schlenvogt said. “If those two applicants hadn’t come forth, the town could have been left in the lurch. I don’t know what we would have done.

“The clerk’s position is integral to town government.”

Not only does the clerk handle a number of administrative duties, he or she is also in charge of elections.

Appointing a clerk will give the Town Board a larger pool of potential people to choose from and help ensure the person hired can readily step in when the current clerk steps down, Schlenvogt noted.

“A number of the town chairman I spoke to said this was the best move they ever made,” he said.

Although many townships have also decided to appoint their treasurers, Schlenvogt said the Town of Port hasn’t discussed that possibility.

“We often have people approach us about combining the clerk and treasurer’s position,” he said. “But we like the check and balance that having a separate clerk and treasurer provides.”

The proposed ordinance reviewed Tuesday calls for the clerk’s position to be filled by appointment of the Town Board, with the clerk serving a three-year term. The clerk could be removed during the term for cause.