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AMHERST

Keeping seat unfilled shows potential for downsizing

By Sandra Tan
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

So, is the Amherst Town Board ready to shrink?

Maybe. At various points, five of the town's seven council members have expressed a willingness to consider downsizing. But this past week marked the first time a resolution to reduce the board's numbers — at least temporarily — has passed.

The board voted last Monday to leave Council Member Deborah Bruch Bucki's position open when she assumes the town clerk's position on Jan. 1.

The board typically appoints, by a four-vote majority, a person to fill a board vacancy when a council member vacates his or her seat midterm. Bucki's council term expires at the end of next year, meaning any new board appointee would serve for a year then be free to run for re-election.

However, the board voted 5-1 to make no appointment, which means the Town Board would operate with only six members in 2009. Supervisor Satish Mohan was out of town Monday.

The resolution was introduced by Council Member Barry Weinstein and cosponsored by Council Member Guy Marlette. Council Members Shelly Schratz, Deborah Bruch Bucki and Mark Manna voted in favor; Daniel Ward voted against.

Manna and Weinstein said they favored leaving the post vacant because a political patronage appointment would not serve the interest of taxpayers. Manna, a Democrat, pointed out that if the board fills the post in January, a Republican could be appointed to fill the seat now held by a Democrat.

Both Schratz and Marlette said they favor the idea of a permanent downsizing of the board and consider the resolution a step in that direction.



“I personally think we could go to a five-member board,” said Schratz, who has publicly said she won’t run again for her Town Board seat when her term expires next year.

That would position the board to reduce its numbers from seven to five through attrition, if the desire exists.

Marlette, who has steadfastly opposed board downsizing in the past, said he has had a change of heart. While he used to believe the size of the town should dictate the size of the board, he has concluded since that the board’s effectiveness is more dependent on the hard work, intelligence and commitment of those serving, not an arbitrary number of members.

Weinstein said he has supported the idea of downsizing through attrition in the past, but Monday night’s resolution is not part of any larger downsizing proposal. He added that the resolution does “leave the door open” for future discussion on the topic.

Manna, however, said he does not see the resolution as the start of a “trial run” for a five-member board.

Council Members Manna and Ward have consistently opposed downsizing measures, saying such proposals don’t serve taxpayer interests in the region’s largest suburban municipality.

Mohan has previously stated that he believes reduced representation is harmful to democracy. However, he added that while he opposes downsizing, he would not stand in the way of a public referendum to allow the people to decide the matter.

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