

Home rule worth hassles of village government

With less than two weeks to go before the March 21 primary election, the debate over whether Downers Grove should remain a home-rule community has reached a fever pitch.

At stake is the village's authority to tax, to incur debt and to determine at the local level how to address issues of public health, safety, morals and other important concerns.

Home rule allows for the exercise of all those prerogatives, but make no mistake: The focus of those who wish to see this important authority repealed is squarely on taxes.

For years, groups such as the Downers Grove Watch have been angered by the Village Council's decision to enact a 0.5 percent sales tax, to build a parking deck and to offer developers attractive deals on downtown properties to spur redevelopment.

That the Watch finally succeeded in its second attempt to put a home-rule referendum on the ballot is a testament to its abiding frustration with village hall. Members of the group have tried for years to influence the council's actions to little avail. And if the group has to throw out the baby with the bathwater to finally make its muscle felt, it is apparently willing to pay that steep price.

A second interest group is also at work against home rule, and these folks, too, are familiar for their entrenched stance against anything that threatens to increase or even maintain taxes, and to underscore the rights of elected officials to act on behalf of the citizenry.

These are the no-government types who would slash taxes and services and put every question up for referendum, knowing full well that's one sure way to hobble, if not entirely incapacitate, the wheels of government.

To this group, the home-rule referendum exists simply as a means to an end — another opportunity to chip away at its dual targets of government and taxes.

It should be abundantly clear the problem with both these viewpoints is their focus on just one narrow aspect of home rule instead of the entirety of authorities it bestows. Indeed, under any other circumstances, you might expect to find both groups lining up behind a statute that grants more local control instead of handing it over to the legislature in distant Springfield. Or heralding a half percentage point tax for village shoppers as an alternative to higher property taxes for all residents.

But no. It seems nothing matters more now than resolutely stripping powers from a Village Council they feel has overreached and overspent for years.

This is a shortsighted and potentially devastating solution to a situation that can be addressed by other means. There are better ways to slap down elected officials whom one disfavors, including voting them out of office or dogging them tirelessly while they serve.

Now, the home-rule referendum might be one way of doing that, albeit a dangerous one for the future of our community. All towns need to borrow money occasionally, and our home-rule authority results in improved bond ratings and immediate access to the financial markets when rates are lowest. It also allows us to maintain our library, bus service and other quality-of-life services we enjoy.

But while I strongly support the continuation of home rule in Downers Grove, I also understand a little of the frustration shared by its detractors. Some of these are residents who haven't been able to make their voices heard by other means.

There is a lovely little civics lesson here for both the Village Council and the citizens who can't seem to get



their way in the give and take of local politics.

To the council, I would suggest a more sincere effort to respond in a timely matter to concerns brought by organized groups in the community. Those new building codes, promised months ago, are just one example of the council's recalcitrance in addressing an issue considered essential by many.

As for the citizens who feel their viewpoint is ignored, I would hope they continue to work constructively for the changes they want without striking out at fundamentals that allow elected officials flexibility and deliver to our community the excellent services we have come to expect.

I know all too well what happens when a town relinquishes its home-rule authority, and it isn't a pretty picture. I grew up in Rockford, a city that is being held out as an example of the improvements that result when home rule is abolished.

The Rockford I know is a dying town with crumbling streets, bad schools, enormous property taxes and homes that have missed the run-up in real estate values that Downers Grove and so many other American cities have experienced.

My parents bought their modest Sears home for \$10,000 in 1962. It's worth maybe \$75,000 today, and they pay some \$2,000 in property taxes each year after their senior citizen discount.

I wasn't looking for another Rockford when I moved to Downers Grove. But if the majority of voters vote "yes" to repeal home rule on March 21, we all might get it.

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