

Village-Only Merger Vote! 'Fellowship of the Rings' Falters

by Ken Signorello & Irene Wrenner
August 31

[Only Village residents](#) will vote on merger in November.

With Town and Village votes planned ages ago, how did we wind up with just one partner at the altar?

Years of work were at stake in the last-minute joint board meeting held August 20th.

The Town Select-board (SB) and Village Trustees hadn't settled a half-dozen issues in the merger plan (charter). As the deadline for warning the vote and publishing the plan approached, the SB gave up on November, re-setting their sights on a March vote instead.

Rather than surrender to the calendar, the [Trustees met just days before](#), and all-but-decided to put merger on the Village ballot this fall, with or without a companion vote from the SB.

At that meeting they requested the August 20th special meeting, as a last-ditch effort to persuade the SB to also warn a November vote.

A lot was riding on this meeting and its potential outcomes. As municipal meetings go, this one displayed an unusually high degree of suspense. It was like two teams lining up for a championship playoff.

First Quarter: Trustees Justify a Village-Only Vote

To open, SB Chair Elaine

Haney asks the Trustees why they pushed on unilaterally.

Village President Andrew Brown wants to take advantage of the expected high turnout for a presidential election.

George Tyler makes it personal. He observes,

["Merger no longer has the priority"](#) that it's had for the last three years with the SB. There's no sense in me mincing words. It's like the [Fellowship of the Ring](#), and I feel that fellowship is crumbling." [The fellowship of the ring is a reference to a disparate group on a quest in a J.R.R. Tolkien book of the same name.]

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Phil Scott Holds Up Amtrak Re-Start

Rail Fans: Write to the Gov!

by Irene Wrenner, September 3

As the federal government messes with the US Postal Service, one might wonder if Amtrak's restart in Vermont is being held up by officials in Washington DC.

Not at all, say members of VRAN, the Vermont Rail Action Network. It's Governor Scott and VTRANS officials that have kept Amtrak grounded.

Ironically, the Vermonter line is back in service from and to DC, but it ends in New Haven, CT rather than heading here!

At VRAN's August 26th meeting, rail advocates urged the train-loving public to help get passenger rail rolling again by contacting state officials.

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Merger t-shirts were gifted to Town and Village staff and elected officials, who attended a retreat to plan Essex' future on June 22, 2019.

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Tyler suggests the reason for the crumbling of the alliance is that new SB members [Vince Franco and Dawn Hill-Fleury] are not totally up-to-speed. [Those new members hail from the Town-outside-the-Village, giving TOV residents the majority on the Selectboard for the first time is over a year. The April resignation of Annie Cooper (a Village resident) and subsequent appointment of Dawn Hill-Fleury created this shift in political dynamics.]

Tyler believes putting merger on the Village ballot now will lock in place and honor what's been done by both boards for the past three years. [It's an open invitation to the Town](#) to join the Village, albeit on terms the Village has proposed. And yet, he's not optimistic about merger's chances in a town-wide vote:

"Chances are," [he says](#), returning to the Fellowship of the Ring analogy, "we're not gonna get to throw the ring into the fire, okay? Chances are, very high likelihood, that no matter what we do, if the Town puts the merger charter on the ballot in [the spring] it's gonna fail, okay?"

For the SB, a failed Town merger vote would be business as usual, Tyler says. "For the Village it's a disaster." He suggests the outcome of the November vote, if it fails, will spur a conversation about alternatives. This is not an attempt to coerce. Instead, this vote should take pressure off both boards to continue working on merger for the next three months.

Second Quarter: SB Members Feel Cornered

Pat Murray is "uncomfortable" that the SB has been put over a barrel by the Trustees' recent action to finalize the charter singlehandedly.

He feels that merger won't pass until the representation model is settled. [Right now, the SB wants the "3+3" (www.fairness1st.org) district representation model passed by voters in March; Trustees want a seventh at-large member, which negates the equal representation the voters chose in March.]

Vince Franco echoes that including "3+3" is crucial.

Andy Watts notes the extensive public engagement that was promised has yet to take place.

Dawn Hill-Fleury wants to see the separation numbers that were requested. [Costs of Separation were requested](#) of staff by two dozen residents on July 28th.

Haney says her board is compelled to include "3+3" and pleads with Trustees to wait until March to put forth a charter they can all agree on.

Third Quarter: Representation Conversation

The Trustees respond. Even though the town overwhelmingly approved it, Raj Chawla believes "3+3" should have no bearing on the merger charter. He also thinks the Village has been very generous by agreeing to a 12-year timeframe for merger tax transfer.

Tyler warns of the "[dark feelings](#)" he expects if the merger doesn't pass in the Town in March. He heard Village sentiments against merger at a recent downtown event: Why is the Village giving up so much? Why is the Town not paying us for all the infrastructure they would acquire?

Acknowledging the possibility that merger might not pass in November, Tyler wants a back-up plan saying he can't focus on developing one while he's still working on merger.

At this point Watts makes an offer to the Village representatives: In exchange for TOV support of the Village charter, would the Trustees give up resistance to 3+3 equal representation? He believes the TOV won't support the charter without it. Nor will he.

Watts further ponders, if only the Village passes this merger, where does it go? Merger Attorney Dan Richardson explains, "It's like a wedding. If only the groom shows up, it's called off, no matter how eager the groom is."

Chawla responds to Watts' offer, saying the Village is not giving in on 3+3. Because the Village is already giving up so much.

[Brown](#) backs up Chawla with a long list of sacrifices, ending with giving up "control of our destiny, our downtown, our community."

Brown makes an offer of his own: If agreement can be reached on everything except representation, would the SB go forward with a merger vote in November?

Murray says he'd have a hard time explaining to voters why they'd be voting on two different charters at the same time.

Halftime!

The public weighs in. One astute observation is that Tyler's labeling of "3+3" as "gerrymandering" appeared hypocritical, when his "3+3+1" representation model uses the very same districts.

Fourth Quarter: SB "Decides"

Haney feels backed into a corner. She wanted a merger document that both boards agreed on and that she could "share with the public with a [straight face and clean conscience](#)", which she can't do right now.

Brown concedes the boards won't be coming to agreement on merger charter language tonight.

Tyler is thinking ahead to the likelihood of failure at the polls; [what should we do as an alternative?](#)

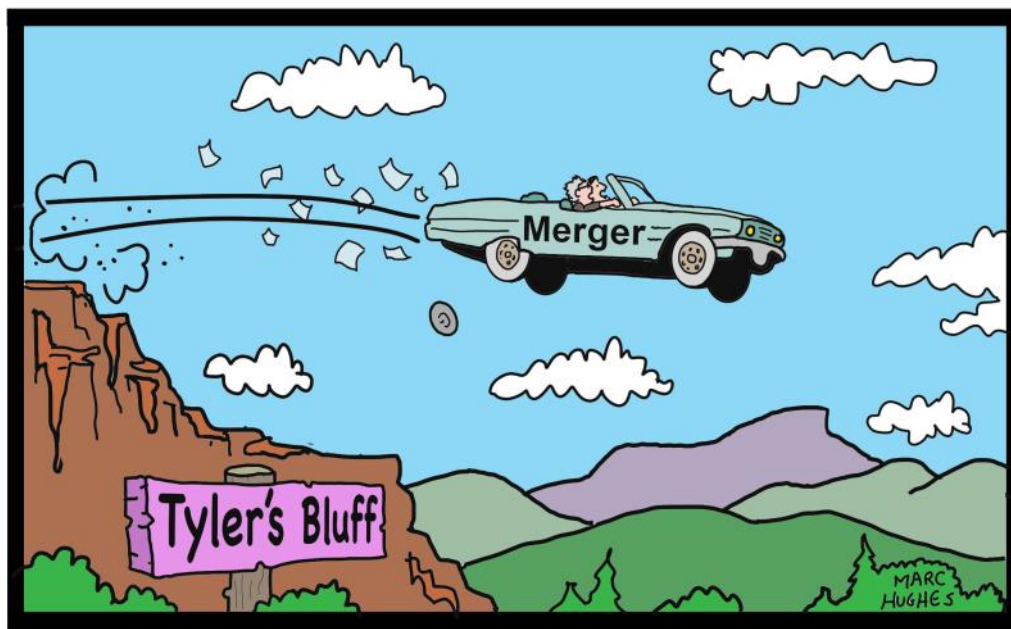
Haney tells the Trustees to [do what they need to do](#).

Trustee Dan Kerin names the elephants in the room: taxation and voting.

Without a hint of irony, he states, "The status quo is intolerable, that's why this subject keeps coming up decade after decade."

Haney offers the Trustees some consolation. Budget season will start soon, and the SB can adjust Town spending in the Village from Town capital, for example, without going to voters.

George and Andrew Go For Broke



Tyler understands the SB needs more time, but he wants to call the question in the Village.

The SB consensus is, they won't warn a town-wide vote in November and will prepare for a vote in March. They vote to adjourn (3-2, Watts and Haney oppose).

Overtime! Trustees Decide

Now on their own, the Trustees move and second the merger vote question. Earnest discussion ensues.

One Trustee expressing trepidation is Chawla: mismatched charters (November and March) may lead to misinformation, obfuscation and opens them "up for trouble". That is, if the Town passes a different version of the charter than the Village, the two versions will need to be reconciled.

Attorney Richardson acknowledges this is "unprecedented. Usually boards get on the

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Budget-to-Ballot on a Ballot, at last!

by Irene Wrenner, September 3

The Town Selectboard and Village Trustees, in separate August meetings, voted unanimously to ask voters whether or not to move approval of their respective annual budgets from floor votes at annual meetings to Australian ballot.

For years, advocates of this change have suggested that more people can vote on the budget if they are not required to attend an in-person meeting on a weeknight.

Look for this question on your Nov. 3rd ballot(s).

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Bring the Vermonter back to Essex Jct!

Amtrak was fully funded this year. Therefore, the COVID suspension of passenger rail has allowed the state to save money since March 26, on the backs of potential riders, many of whom lack alternatives that are as easy or affordable as the train.

These budget savings, while welcomed in the short run, may have lasting, negative effects on our economy if the Vermonter and Ethan Allen passenger lines don't return to the Green Mountain State.

On trains running elsewhere, Amtrak is doing enhanced cleaning and disinfecting, booking to ensure physical distancing, and using onboard filtration / fresh air exchange systems to improve passenger safety during this pandemic.

VRAN suggests you take a moment to telephone or write to the man in whose hands our train's future rests:

Governor Phil Scott
109 State Street, Pavilion
Montpelier, VT 05609-0101
(802) 828-3333

<https://governor.vermont.gov/email>

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Rings

same page before taking a charter to the voters."

Tyler recognizes there's "a lot of uncertainty". "We're all feeling a little strange; this is a monumental step" He then asks Attorney Richardson, "Is there something glaring about this that we might want to be thinking about?"

Richardson responds, it's risky, it's a gambit, you're locking yourself into this version, it can easily backfire, but from a legal perspective you're fine.

Tyler hesitates, saying, I'm not getting cold feet or buyer's [remorse]. If merger fails, "what is the next step?"

Chawla has second thoughts. He realizes the Trustees may not have a good read on public sentiment in the Village, and this vote would be finding that

out the hard way. He sees no harm in waiting for a March vote.

Both Chawla and Tyler have been surprised by recent requests for separation from constituents, and that merger alternative may look appealing to the TOV once the numbers are released.

Brown points out that all Trustees ran on the issue of merger — and not on separation.

After more than three hours, the vote: Will the Village put the merger question on the November ballot? (4-1, Chawla opposes.)

The meeting closes with Tyler realizing the plan's language must be ready for publication in two weeks. "We're gonna have to try to buff this charter up fairly soon. ... I'll take that responsibility." That's logical. Tyler has been the primary author of the prior two versions of the charter.

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