

**A CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY CIVICS LESSON**  
**RELEASE DATE: April 22, 2010**  
**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**  
**CONTACT THE BOARD OF ELECTIONS AT 716-753-4580**

*MAYVILLE - New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo's "NY Government Reorganization and Citizen Empowerment Act" took effect this past March and gives historic new opportunities for Chautauqua County citizens to eliminate or change the lines of town and village governments by way of ballot referendum. As part of this important legislation, we believe that it's time to reeducate ourselves as to what our local government is and how we got here.*

**TOWNS AND CITIES**

Each and every citizen in Chautauqua County is a resident of one of twenty seven towns or two cities. Dunkirk City and Jamestown are examples of two areas that were granted incorporations by the state to be cities. Size does not dictate if a community is a city.

Towns and cities in Chautauqua County provide government of varying levels from property assessments for taxing purposes, highways and police departments, along with other services that elected leaders determined were needed through the years as local home rule powers granted by the state allowed for. Everyone in New York State lives in a town or city.

**VILLAGES**

Villages in Chautauqua County are incorporated areas of towns that were created principally, if not all, in the 1800's. Village residents continued to be residents of the town, but the incorporated governments were also allowed broad home rules powers by the state to pass laws and regulations for the welfare of the citizens. The need for villages arose when people in populated areas of a town wanted extra services like water troughs for their horses, graded streets, sidewalks, fire fighting equipment, police or other services that the town as a whole could not or would not want to provide for all citizens. Thus, the village was able to tax for these extra services and residents pay taxes to both governmental entities. There are fifteen villages in Chautauqua County. Two of the incorporated villages, Cherry Creek and Sherman, carry the same name as the town they are part of. One village, Sinclairville, is located in townships of Gerry and Charlotte. The Town of Dunkirk is a totally separate government from the City of Dunkirk. It surrounds the city and is separated to the east and west.

**HAMLETS**

The term "hamlet" is not defined under state law, but is a community or area within the towns with no government or taxing authority.

**POST OFFICES**

This is where the real confusion starts. There are thirty eight different post offices in the county, plus Jamestown has a sub station. Everyone of the county's fifteen villages and two cities have post offices bearing the same as the community where the post office building is located. Just seven towns have post offices that carry the town's name and fourteen different hamlets have post offices with post offices named for the hamlet. Five towns in the county don't even host a post office building and share zip codes with neighboring communities.

The confusion is created because all post office delivery areas extend beyond the limits of the incorporated villages, or state designated town or city boundaries and certainly beyond the limits of the hamlets with post offices so named, but with no real limits. When most people are asked where they live, they will state the name of the post office zip code they receive their mail from.

**SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

Again, school district boundaries do not follow the governmental lines of their host communities. Even Jamestown and Dunkirk have students from outside the city limits as part of their student bodies. Many people take great pride in the belonging and community that stems from the school activities and sports teams. Maple Grove, Chautauqua Lake, Southwestern and Pine Valley are names not taken from the communities where they are located. Frewsburg is named for the hamlet where it is located and the remaining thirteen of the eighteen districts take the name of the school's incorporated community it serves.

### **FIRE DEPARTMENTS AND DISTRICTS**

There are forty two fire departments or districts in Chautauqua County, according to the county Emergency Management website, that mostly do not follow geographic lines which are generally named for the hamlet, village city or town where they are located.

### **SPECIAL DISTRICTS**

The mainly post World War II exodus from the more populated areas of Chautauqua County to rural town areas saw a citizen desire for fire protection contracts with larger neighboring municipalities. In addition, there was a desire for the extension of water and sewer lines from the same city and village, thus the answer became special districts. These special districts did not have the same wide authority of the former villages and were mostly run by the town governments that created each entity, but allowed for the levy of user rates or fees and for the ability to bond or borrow for construction and long term repayment by the created districts. Very large sewer districts that crossed town lines were also created along Chautauqua Lake and Lake Erie. The names used were mainly technical.

### **OTHER UTILITY**

Other municipal owned utility districts have been formed in the Jamestown, Falconer, West Ellicott, Brocton, Mayville, Westfield, Sherman and Chautauqua areas.

### **CONCLUSION**

Hopefully voters will understand that any look at consolidation will not mean the loss of identity and all conversation will be based on the short and long term economics of the consolidations or dissolutions being looked at.

To get a consolidation or dissolution proposition on the ballot for an up or down vote of the electorate, a citizen must draft a petition and witnesses must circulate any petition signed by 10% of the registered voters in any Chautauqua County municipality. However, for small villages with less than 500 population, the law requires signature of 20% of the registered voters to sign the referendum request.

We would strongly recommend that any citizen's group circulating a petition to seek out an attorney or the help of one of the local political parties which are familiar with the legal technicalities associated with petition circulation. Petitions circulated under this law would be filed with the village clerk for village items, town clerk for town items and county clerk for items that cross town lines. Petition samples and information is available at the Attorney General's website and by link from [www.votechautauqua.com](http://www.votechautauqua.com)

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