

Blooming Grove: 6 wards, 6 council members

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BLOOMING GROVE - When Blooming Grove voters go to the polls in November, they'll find a big change in the way they vote for council members. The town will be divided into wards, and voters in each of those six wards will choose a council member who will represent only that ward.

No more at-large voting for council members. And the council will increase by two members from the current four. The supervisor will still be elected at-large.

"It's a good and important change," said Blooming Grove Supervisor Robert Fromaget, who pushed for the ward system as a way to make government more responsive. He was joined in the effort by a Citizens Committee that carried petitions and brought the issue to referendum. Voters approved it by a 2-1 margin Nov. 8.

On Wednesday, the Town Board unanimously approved a map, prepared by a consultant from the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, that divides the town among six wards for council elections. Since the town has a total population of about 18,050, each of the six wards will contain about 3,005 people. The town has two villages: Washingtonville and South Blooming Grove. Washingtonville will be divided into two wards, roughly between north and south. Most of the Village of South Blooming Grove will comprise one ward, with about 230 people spilled over into a ward to the northwest.

The vote came after a year of heated debate in the town. Most of the Town Board members initially opposed wards. Some members of the Citizens Committee feared the board would somehow stall the plan. But once the voters spoke, the opposition evaporated.

During public hearings on the plan, some residents said the ward system would tamp down the push for housing from Hasidic residents of the Village of Kiryas Joel, just to the south of the Village of South Blooming Grove. Many residents said the pressure for housing has been especially intense in the Worley Heights section of South Blooming Grove.

Now that the Town Board has OK'd the wards, the map, prepared by Joshua Simons, senior research associate at the Benjamin Center, with the help of a seven-member oversight committee, will go to the Orange County Board of Elections so new election districts can be drawn. The Board of Elections is expected to finalize the change by June, at the latest - in time for candidates to start petitions for the Nov. 7 elections.

Two of the incumbent council members, Democrat Johanna Kiernan, the deputy supervisor, and Republican Mark Levy will now live in the same ward. They'll have to run against each other if both wish to remain on the council.

"I guess we'll have to arm wrestle," Kiernan
