

OUR REGION

Chester group sponsors ward session

Opponents of potential bloc-vote planning for referendum in fall

By Richard J. Bayne
Times Herald-Record

CHESTER – Founders of a citizens group pushing wards as a way to head off potential bloc-vote power of a Hasidic Jewish development under construction said Thursday they're planning for a mid-October referendum.

The group, Preserve Chester, sponsored a session Thursday night on ward conversion with local government expert Gerald Benjamin of the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz. After the event, Kristi Greco, one of the Preserve Chester co-founders, said they had already collected 102 of the 187 signatures required to mount the election.

"We're going to have that election," said Steve Keahon, the other co-founder. "Dr. Benjamin's talk tonight was a good foundation."

Like the vast majority of towns in New York state, Chester's four council members and the supervisor are elected at large. The planned 431-home Greens at Chester development is expected to bring in about 3,000 Hasidic Jewish residents. Preserve Chester is looking to diffuse that potential bloc-vote power by splitting the town into wards.

The development is under construction on a site north of West Avenue and west of the Whispering Hills subdivision. The first houses are expected to go up in the spring.



Local government expert Gerald Benjamin, who heads the Benjamin Institute at SUNY New Paltz, outlines steps the Town of Chester would have to take to implement a ward system of government.

[RICHARD J. BAYNE/TIMES HERALD-RECORD]

Benjamin handed out a study that said Greens at Chester would add about 1,000 voters to Chester's existing voter rolls of about 11,300, with town and village combined. That's an increase of about 12 percent, Benjamin's figures said.

In his talk, Benjamin said Hasidic Jewish voters tend to vote at high rates, vote in a bloc, directed by religious community leadership, and are highly focused on local issues, like water and sewer service.

Benjamin, who is Jewish and said he's experienced anti-Semitism, said it shouldn't be considered bigotry to have experience-based concerns about the possible consequences of Hasidic influence over a community's politics.

Benjamin listed towns in New York: Ramapo, Blooming Grove and Mamakating, with growing Hasidic Jewish populations, which have adopted ward systems. Benjamin's consultants

helped Blooming Grove develop its ward system. Blooming Grove had its first elections by wards in November.

"I think wards is the only solution," said Bruce Green, a 34-year town resident who lives in the Whispering Hills development right next to where Greens at Chester is going up. "They (Hasidic communities) don't play the game fair."

But Chester Supervisor Alex

Jamieson said Preseve Chester is moving too quickly. "There needs to be more education," Jamieson said after Benjamin's talk. Blooming Grove went from four council members to six. "I'm not thrilled with going to six," Jamieson said. "That would be too many for this town."

In Blooming Grove, the supervisor is still elected at large.

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