

With voter rolls to increase 13 percent, Chester considers ward system to slow rate of change | Goshen and Chester NY

CHESTER

Petitions supporting ward system to circulate at Tuesday's community concert

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Photos



Chester residents sign a petition last Thursday to trigger a referendum on whether to change to a ward electoral system (Photo by Frances Ruth Harris)



• Gerald Benjamin (Photo by Frances Ruth Harris)



• Nancy George, Alba Jregorwich, Annie Englehart and Lynn Berenberg (Photo by Frances Ruth Harris)



Town of Chester Supervisor Alex Jamieson, Rosie Bono, Helen Gorczynski, Carmen Verbert, Marian Zangrillo, and Joe Verbert in the kitchen of the new senior center (Photo by Frances Ruth Harris)



A crowd turned out to hear more about the ward system (Photo by Frances Ruth Harris)



Frank and Joann Bruno and Ralph Stanley (Photo by Frances Ruth Harris)





• County executive Steve Neuhaus (Photo by Frances Ruth Harris)



• Renee Gonzales (Photo by Frances Ruth Harris)





Orange County Legislator John Vero, Joe Herbert, Jr., Marian Zangrillo, Carmen Herbert, Town of Chester Supervisor Alex Jamieson, Rosie Bono, Kathleen O'Grady (Photo by Frances Ruth Harris)



Chester citizens sign the petition for a referendum on a ward system (Photo by Frances Ruth Harris)

"We have seen these effects on local governance as Hasidic population grows — one, increased conflict over land use, two, resultant effort to create new governments and villages, three, increased growth-related pressure for basic services like water and sewer, four, increased litigiousness, five, redefinition of local political dynamics from party-based politics to politics based on support or opposition to the Hasidic community to overall increased mobilization and turnout."

Professor Gerald Benjamin

By Frances Ruth Harris

— Chester voters are considering a new way of electing their town representatives as a way to slow the social changes expected when new residents start moving into the Greens of Chester.

"There will be 431 homes, 1,290 bedrooms, 3,000 residents, and an estimated 1,000 registered voters," reflecting a 12.7 percent increase in voters, said Gerald Benjamin, a professor and director of the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, which collaborates with governments, businesses, and not-for-profits in the Hudson Valley on topics of concern to local citizens. He spoke to Chester residents who came out to the senior center on June 21 to hear more about the proposed ward system.

"Hasidic citizens define their community religiously, not geographically, register to vote at high rates, are socially conservative, do not adhere consistently to one or the other major political party, and tend to vote in a block, directed by religious community leadership," Benjamin said.

He gave the Town of Monroe and the East Ramapo School District as examples of localities that have experienced a high rate of change, including difficulty in passing budgets or adopting initiatives. Hasidim "are transactional in their politics, are results, not process, oriented, and govern to benefit their community first," he said.

Currently, the Town of Chester currently elects its supervisor and council members in townwide elections. A ward system would split the town into districts; each in turn would elect its own representative to the town board.

Preserve Chester invited Benjamin to speak to the community last week.

5 ways the town will changeKristi Kerns Greco of Preserve Chester said she will pass petitions at the next concert of the Chester Music Series from 7 to 9 p.m. on Tuesday, June 26, at 47 Main Street in downtown Chester. Each page holds 20 signatures; 187 signatures are needed to trigger a referendum.

Benjamin said twice that number of signatures are needed to make sure there are enough legal signatures.

He said a ward system will not stop the influx of people with large families, but will slow the process, giving all citizens time to work within the system and adjust to social changes.

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Benjamin said that "to constrain future Hasidic political influence in Chester is to switch from at-large to ward-based elections for the town board."

Online: The Benjamin Center: newpaltz.edu/benjamincenter

Related stories: "Chester considers changing to ward election system": <https://bit.ly/2KoqWso>

"Greens will 'cripple' school district, county executive says": <https://bit.ly/2KmKf1N>

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