

## Let's Decide on Consolidating the Townships

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We've heard many members of the Beaver Island community express interest in and support for consolidating our two townships into one. They say it doesn't make sense to have two systems of government for an island community with only about 600 residents. They say it's inefficient—a waste of everyone's time and energy—to have to have each township adopt the exact same policies, using their own separate processes and meetings. They say the island doesn't need to have, for instance, two planning commissions, one for each township, when there could be just one for the whole island. And they note that the townships have trouble filling all the vacancies on these duplicated bodies; there are just not enough of us to go around. They say that important issues, like economic development of the island or protection of natural resources, are not a Peaine or St. James Township issue, but a whole island issue, so why not address them as a whole community with just one government?

We agree with these concerns and decided to do something about it. We think that voters in the Beaver Island community should decide if the townships should be consolidated. So we are circulating petitions that ask the Charlevoix County Board of Commissioners to schedule an election in both townships about whether or not to consolidate. Under Michigan law, that's how we, the people living in the townships, can make the decision.

When John drives visitors to the island around in the BIBCO tour bus, he points out the St. James Township hall and, a little later, the Peaine Township hall. People laugh: "Two townships for this small community! Why?" There have been two townships on Beaver Island since at least the early 1900s. But whatever made sense back then doesn't seem to make sense anymore. Of course, the townships are different in some ways, but no one here lives, works, and plays in just one township. We use the roads in both townships. We travel to the mainland from facilities—airports, a dock—in both townships. We depend on fire, transfer station, health care, and emergency medical services that are island wide, but for some reason are governed by two townships.

We realize that in the past there have been political rivalries between leading citizens in each township, but we think most islanders don't buy into those fights and fiefdoms anymore. In any case, the number of voters in each township is almost exactly the same—around 320—so neither township's voters would be able to automatically dominate the election of a consolidated township board.

We're not saying anything negative about the elected officials or employees in both townships. We're saying that the governance structure, the two-township model, is no longer a good idea and we should change it.

But nothing can change if we don't have an election to decide.

The petition we are circulating for signature by registered voters in either township asks the County Board to schedule an election in Peaine and St. James Townships so voters can decide if they want to consolidate the two townships into one. Under state law for townships, the election must be scheduled between January 1, 2018 and May 1, 2018. (We should note that the Charlevoix County Clerk says that a 2016 change in the state's election law means a township consolidation election cannot be scheduled before May 1. So just when an election would occur will not be clear until the state Legislature acts to resolve the conflict in statutes. Nonetheless, we think it's important to gather petition signatures now—signaling to the county and state that Islanders are serious about exercising their right to determine consolidation.)

Under state law, an election about consolidation must address several related topics, so the petition language also:

1. Identifies the two townships that would be consolidated (Peaine and St. James)

2. Provides a name for the consolidated township – Beaver Island Township. We considered some options, but this name seemed to be one everyone would be comfortable with even if it wasn't their first choice.
3. Establishes the voted extra millages that the consolidated township would be authorized to levy in 2018 and 2019. (See below.)

If a majority of voters in both townships approves consolidation, Beaver Island Township would take effect November 20, 2018. The consolidated township would have five elected officials, including a supervisor, clerk, and treasurer, who would have been elected previously in the August 2018 and November 2018 elections. The assets and liabilities of the two townships would belong to Beaver Island Township. The consolidated township would adopt a set of resolutions to consolidate existing commissions, boards, authorities, and all other arrangements of Peaine and St. James Townships.

The extra voted millages in the petition would:

- Establish a cap of 13.75 mills on total extra voted mills—which is at or below the current total caps in Peaine and St. James Townships. The consolidated township board, just like the current township boards, would determine how much of the voted mills to levy on property tax bills to cover annual budget expenses.
- Maintain each of the two township's eight previously voter-approved specific purposes for extra voted mills. (Both townships have voted millages that support seven of the services. The eighth, the Beaver Island Historical Society, is supported by a voted millage in St. James and out of the general fund in Peaine.)
- Set a millage rate for each specific purpose that blends the Peaine and St. James rates into a single consolidated rate for the island.
- Expire each special voted millage on a date previously approved by township voters.

We think that voters should look more closely at what

<b>Extra Voted Millages in Petition</b>			
	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Consolidated Millage Rate</b>	<b>Expiration Date</b>
1	Airport	.85	12/31/2019
2	Emergency Medical Services	3.0	12/31/2019
3	Fire	1.0	12/31/2018
4	Health Center	2.0	12/31/2018
5	Historical Society	.1	12/31/2019
6	Roads	1.4	12/31/2019
7	Township Operations	3.6	12/31/2018
8	Transfer Station	1.8	12/31/2019

consolidation would involve, and the best way for that to happen is to put the question on the ballot. Some people hope, for instance, that consolidation might lead to a reduction in the cost of local government on the island. But that might not be the case; it would depend on budget decisions by the future township elected officials and on what voters decide about future special-purpose millages. This is just the sort of discussion that could occur in the days before an election.

So, one step at a time: Let's get the consolidation issue in front of voters in 2018. That's what our petitions are about. Then let's have the kind of community discussions that inform and educate voters and answer their questions. Then let's decide what we want.