

Voters: Leave us alone

Again, West Oldsmar residents tell Oldsmar officials that they don't want to become part of the city.

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OLDSMAR - Voters in West Oldsmar once again told city officials thanks but no thanks, rejecting an annexation proposal by nearly a 3-to-1 ratio Tuesday. With all votes counted, the city's annexation proposal went down to defeat 84 to 30. Voter turnout topped 29 percent, slightly higher than expected.

It was the fourth time in 40 years voters in the notoriously independent enclave had fended off an attempt to make them part of the city.

"It was disappointing, but I think we got the information out to the folks, and we approached it, I think, very professionally and made them aware of what the options were," said City Clerk Lisa Lene, who coordinated the city's effort to reach voters in West Oldsmar.

A study by the Pinellas Planning Council had concluded that annexation would bring in about \$233,000 in new revenue to the city. New expenditures would be approximately \$130,000, leaving an annual net revenue of about \$103,000 if West Oldsmar were annexed. The study estimated that West Oldsmar homeowners would save \$100 or more a year by joining the city.

City Council member Jim Ronecker, who led the annexation effort, said he wished more people had gone to the polls.

"I think it's disappointing to have 70 percent not vote in what I would consider to be such an important election," he said.

Along with lower taxes, city officials said they offered West Oldsmar residents a more responsive government. The response, Ronecker said, defied logic.

"We offered them an opportunity to have a win-win scenario and they rejected it," he said.

Some West Oldsmar residents said they didn't see enough benefits in the proposal and didn't want to give up their live-and-let-live lifestyle.

"I have three boats," said fabricator welder John Allen, 41, who voted against the proposal. "I'm not for all the rules and regulations. That's the reason I moved to unincorporated Pinellas."

Building contractor Randi Martin estimated that joining the city would save him \$370 a year on his utility bills, but he said he had no reason to think the city would pave streets any faster than the county.

"Most people are against it because the only people who are going to gain are the city of Oldsmar," said Martin, 49.

West Oldsmar resident Theresa Rybak, 52, said she voted for annexation because she thought the city would help clean up and beautify troubled areas north of State Road 580.

That would "help that neighborhood, because it's been rundown for years," she said.

Leading up to the vote, city officials had worked to reach voters in person, by telephone and through the mail. The city paid a Clearwater consultant \$18,000 to help find enough voters in West Oldsmar to schedule the referendum and to help run the campaign. Officials held two public information meetings, sent West Oldsmar voters three mailings and managed to call 111 voters directly to ask if they needed more information to make up their minds.

In the end, however, city officials learned that West Oldsmar voters valued their independence more than a lower tax or water bill.

"We found out after the first town hall meeting that the savings wasn't the issue at all," Lene said. "It was code enforcement and the perception of more government."

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