Voters say no to Rotterdam ambulance plan
By Lauren Stanforth Staff Writer
Published: 03:51 p.m., Tuesday, December 14, 2010

ROTTERDAM -- Voters Tuesday rejected a proposal to create a special tax district that would keep Rotterdam Emergency Medical Services afloat.

The referendum, which would have cost the owner of a $200,000 home $20 a year, went down by a vote of 2,472 to 1,386. The polling was marked by a continuous stream of people descending on Town Hall, a sight that Schenectady County Board of Elections Republican Commissioner Art Brassard called rare for a local election.

The vote decided if property owners would be assessed a tax of 10 cents per $1,000 assessed valuation to help REMS purchase equipment and keep up maintenance on its building. The topic has been a controversial one since two ambulance services merged to become REMS in 2004. The town currently pays the local ambulance corps $120,000 a year, and the tax district would have generated $235,000. Any major expenditures would again have to be voted on by property owners, REMS had said.

Meanwhile, Mohawk Ambulance, a for-profit company that stood to take over service if the tax district went down, actively campaigned for a no vote, putting up billboards and sending out mailers.

"The voters of Rotterdam sent a strong message tonight that they do not want to be taxed for a service they can get for free," Mohawk Ambulance spokesman Tom Nardacci said. "The proposal Mohawk Ambulance made to the town would ensure that Rotterdam residents receive high quality and reliable ambulance service without a new tax."

The previous town administration, led by Republican Supervisor Steven A. Tommasone, agreed to consider creating a tax district, and the current leaders chose to honor the decision and put the question up for a referendum.

Tuesday's voting was complicated by the fact that only property owners could participate. People often had to visit the assessment office to double-check records to see if they were eligible to vote.

Marilyn Anderson, 75, was turned away after she learned that it is the trustee of her estate, not the taxpayer, who gets to vote. She previously handed over the deed on her home to her daughter.
"I'm disappointed," said Anderson, who would have voted to keep the local ambulance corps. "But it's not earth-shattering."

Similar questions were raised about Beverly VanWormer's right to vote Tuesday. She and her daughter, Carla Pneuman, were taken to the assessment office by town attorney Joseph Licarrdi, who ran interference all day long for confused voters. But it turned out that VanWormer's home is in a life estate, which means Pneuman doesn't take over the property until her mother's death. VanWormer voted against the tax district.

"I don't know why we need an extra tax," said VanWormer, 74. "I'm not too happy about the politics in Rotterdam."

At one point in the day, a woman fell outside Town Hall and REMS responded to treat her. The town public works department also had to measure the distance between Town Hall and a campaign sign that was placed in a median out front. The verdict: the sign was outside the 100-foot parameter required.

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