

The Town and City Have the Same Zip Code

By Robert K. Camera

GENEVA – This past Tuesday evening I joined over 75 residents and City officials in attending the City’s DRI meeting featuring the Downtown Streetscape Project.

After the meeting a couple who live in the 4th Ward asked me what was going on with the American Legion rezoning for future development. Unfortunately, I could only report that sometime in early 2020 the rezoning project for the entire City will be completed and that will include zoning for the Legion area.

I sensed a little disappointment that the City was not taking a more proactive approach to this opportunity. Staff could have argued for an accelerated schedule for the Legion area and City Council could have provided an additional \$20K to prioritize the completion of this work. Unfortunately, there was no sense of urgency to entice developers to compete to build lakeside housing inside the City and that would put 12+ acres back on the tax rolls a year earlier.

Staff and Council prefer a City government in slow motion.

The Legion is not the only example of “fiddling” while Geneva slowly “burns.” If one drives up Routes 5 & 20 to the Pre-Emption Road intersection one project billboard on the left reads “Geneva Crossing” and promises a large, new, mixed-use development.

Turn right, down Pre-Emption and then shortly past Lennox Rd., look left and another developer is building a new housing project in the Town after completing a five-month zoning/planning process.

What’s happening at the corner of Pre-Emption and 5 & 20 is a continuation of the self-inflicted wounds the city continues to allow as high taxes discourage (City General Fund tax rate of approximately \$17.23/\$1,000) investment inside our borders.

The combination of more available land just a few hundred yards from our City line and lower taxes (approximately \$6.48/\$1,000 in the Town) is a big reason these projects are happening. Yet, in many ways, the Town development couldn’t happen without the continued capitulation of City leadership.

The Town of Geneva doesn't have the sewer or water resources to support much of the "lower cost" development that has sprung up just over the city line in the last 30 years. The Crossings is just the latest example.

Is the Town Board assuming the City of Geneva will supply sewer services to make this new development feasible?

In my opinion, the City should ask (at least) that any Town requests for increased use of city water or sewer services come with some payment in lieu of taxes for the demands that new development will inevitably make on city services; Town residents count heavily on safe city streets as they and their children move freely to school, churches and into city parks, recreation facilities and the ever more interesting Lakefront much of which is subsidized by city taxpayers.

With the vote at the April City Council meeting, the City of Geneva approved an evaluation of the cost of extending our infrastructure to handle the expected additional sewer services these Town developments are going to need. I opposed this measure because I felt that we were putting the cart before the horse.

Now is the perfect time to draw a line in the sand. The days of the City of Geneva supporting Town development without recompense should be over.

There is precedent for what I am suggesting here. Years ago Hobart and William Smith Colleges recognized its obligation to support and pay for city services that its tax exempt status did not directly require. Those payments each year greatly help maintain the police and fire services and infrastructure the city must supply.

There is no legal requirement for the people of the Town of Geneva to make similar payments to the City, but there is certainly no requirement that the City expend its water and sewer services to make competing development in the town cheaper and easier and at the expense of our own potential.

I do hope our two governments can work amicably together, but we need a level playing field in which we all share equally the burdens and assets of the greater Geneva community.

At the Downtown Streetscape Meeting members of the Barton and Loguidice team, the City's planning consultant, reported on the progress of the design and timetable of the City's critical downtown and lakeside corridors. The traffic calming and walking and biking features of this new design are impressive and

suggest a major new presentation of the City not only to enhance our tourist attractions of downtown and lakeside, but also to provide everyday amenities for our own residents including our neighbors in the Town of Geneva.

I ask that the Town Council consider an annual payment to the City's General Fund budget to help the City maintain the beautiful lakefront and offset the costs of building a more sustainable future for all our residents of 14456.
