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Reorganized Zionsville may equal Carmel in size

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With the clock ticking on its self-imposed Dec. 13 deadline, the committee looking at a proposed consolidation between Zionsville and Eagle and Union townships still has several issues to resolve. One issue might be the sheer size of the consolidated area. The town of Zionsville could more than quadruple in size if the town joins forces with the two townships.

According to the Boone County Surveyor's Office, Zionsville is currently 9.6 square miles, and the unincorporated areas of Union and Eagle townships are 25 and 15 square miles, respectively.

At the end of the reorganization committee's meeting Monday night, Zionsville School Board member Chuck Curtis warned members that a reorganized Zionsville would occupy as much space as Carmel.

Curtis suggested that Zionsville have a sense of "what it wants to be" before going further.

Gene Thompson, chairman of the reorganization committee, said he envisions no big changes, despite the increased mass.

"I don't agree that just because you're occupying a larger area you'll become something different,"

Thompson said. "I look at Zionsville having a larger area as an opportunity to protect and preserve what's around it.

"As we get closer to defining the plan, it's going to have a structure for governing a larger area, but it'll allow the elected officials to move forward with the vision they've determined that's supported by the people who voted them into office," he said, adding that the area's heritage will be preserved.

The Zionsville Town Council and Eagle and Union townships formed the reorganization committee to explore consolidation as a way to eliminate unnecessary levels of government, save money and stave off future annexation attempts by Whitestown or other nearby cities or towns.

The committee will bring its proposal to each local government, which will vote on it. If all three agree to the committee's proposal, the matter will go before the voters in a referendum -- tentatively planned for May 2008. The referendum would require a simple majority of Zionsville and Eagle and Union township votes to pass.

If consolidation is approved, financial savings would come from eliminating the township boards, trustees and assessors.

During Monday night's meeting, several of the nearly 30 people in attendance wanted to talk taxes. One resident questioned rumors that Eagle residents might pay 25 percent more on their taxes, and Union residents would pay 30 percent more.

Thompson and Joe Turk, who's heading a subcommittee on finance, were quick to deny the large tax increases but neither offered estimates of their own. They said more information needs to be collected.

"This (reorganization) committee is made up of six township members and three town members," Thompson said. "Not many people in the township would want to go forward with this if taxes are going to be (significantly) raised."

Alan Townsend, a member of the governance subcommittee, said he thought residents in Union Township should have reservations.

"They might not want to pay for brick streets in the village or the new golf course Zionsville bought," he said.

The reorganization committee members agreed some residents in the unincorporated areas of Union and Eagle townships may pay less in taxes than residents in other areas. The rural areas are slated to continue receiving public safety services from the Boone County Sheriff's Department and road maintenance from the county highway department.

Thompson said the committee's final report would include estimated tax rates for residents for three years.

He and Turk warned residents not to expect huge savings from reorganization right away, saying the savings would come in the long term.