

09/26/2006

Masie putting \$20,000 for ads against change

PAUL POST, The Saratogian

SARATOGA SPRINGS -- Elliott Masie isn't just talking about his views on the city's proposed charter revision. He's putting his money where his mouth is.

The Spa City entrepreneur has pledged to spend up to \$20,000 to convince residents proposed revisions are a bad idea.

'It's an absolutely rushed and non-open process and way too important if we're going to make significant change,' Masie said. 'I'm against the strong mayor role. It concentrates too much power in one person. I don't think the business community's been engaged in this process.'

Masie said he's already given money to the anti-revision group, Saratoga SUCCESS. He said he plans to spend considerably more on newspaper and possibly broadcast advertisements, along with creation of a Web site to make his points known. He hopes to enlist other local business people in the venture.

Masie's wife is on the board of the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce, but was not present at its special meeting Monday at which it voted to not support the charter change referendum.

Mayor Valerie Keehn, who is pushing for charter revisions, disputed criticism that says revisions have come too quickly, without sufficient public involvement.

'Frankly, I think that's just finding fault where there's no fault to be found,' Keehn said.

'Big bucks doesn't buy everything,' Keehn said. 'If they're not supportive of it this year, then there's other reasons they're not admitting to.'

Deputy Mayor Eileen Finneran said the nine-member Charter Review Commission hasn't rushed anything. The concept being proposed was first presented in 1984 and a 2001 panel laid the groundwork for this year's ballot measure, she said.

Voters will decide the issue in the Nov. 7 election.

Currently, the mayor is one of five members of the City Council, all of whom have administrative as well as legislative functions, with no one person in charge of running City Hall. The mayor and four commissioners make all policy decisions collectively.

The proposal calls for a full-time mayor who would be responsible for making appointments to various positions. The mayoral term would be increased from two to four years, and the mayor would function as the city's chief executive, effectively running city government.

'It's not something foreign,' Finneran said. 'It's foreign to here.'

In the mid-1990s, Masie chaired a Smart City committee designed to attract high-tech firms to Saratoga Springs.

'I think this is the 'Dumb City Act,' ' he said of proposed revisions. 'Part of what makes this city work is the fact that we've had less government. Moving toward a strong mayor isn't less government.'

He also criticized the fact only one public hearing has been held -- and that was in August when many people are busy or on vacation.

'I'm not saying we don't need change,' Masie said. 'Just take the time to energize the entire city. There wasn't vibrant discussion in the city.'

But Finneran defended the timing, saying, 'Government doesn't stop working because it's summer.'

She said the public has been allowed to speak at each charter commission meeting. The League of Women Voters is expected to hold a public forum on the topic in October at the Saratoga Springs Public Library. Also, commission members are presenting revision plans to various groups such as senior citizens, she said.

'It's the commission's role now to keep the education process going,' Finneran said. 'Then it's up to the voters.'