

1970's Merger Effort - Westwood & Westwood Hills



Voters Fail to Approve Merger Of Westwood, Westwood Hills

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A proposal to merge the cities of Westwood and Westwood Hills in Northeast Johnson County failed yesterday in preferential balloting.

Westwood residents voted 328 to 200 against the plan. Westwood Hills voters favored the consolidation 127 to 101.

The balloting indicated that Westwood, with a population of 2,304 in one square mile, will not share with Westwood Hills the revenue windfall Westwood gets each year from intangible taxes. Westwood Hills, with a population of 517, buy police protection and street maintenance from Westwood.

The balloting results came as a surprise to officials in both cities. They had said privately they expected Westwood citizens to approve the merger proposal and Westwood Hills residents to reject it. They said Westwood Hills residents identify strongly their city, on of J.C Nichols's earliest residential developments in Johnson County.

Joe Dennis, mayor of Westwood, said he sensed the reversal as balloting began yesterday morning. "It's hard to sell anything out of an empty wagon" he said. He said he was disappointed.

He said Westwood residents particularly older, retired persons living in the norther part of the city, did not see what they would gain from consolidation.

Dennis said he and other merger proponents had never stated clearly why merger was necessary or even desirable. "It wasn't necessary." Dennis said. "Merger just seems like a good thing, especially when you have two little cities side by side and one is failing financially."

Westwood and Westwood Hills would have been merged in April if a majority of voters in both municipalities had approved. Only 40 percent of Westwood's registered voters cast ballots. About 72 percent in Westwood Hills voted.

Dennis, who initiated merger talks a year ago, said since only 25 percent of Westwood's registered voters opposed the merger, The Westwood City Council might approve the merger ordinance anyway. "It's the right thing maybe not today but sooner or later," the mayor said.

One stake in the merger was the sharing of intangible tax revenues each year from United Telecommunications, Inc. the nation's 3rd largest telephone utility, headquartered in Westwood.

Last year Westwood collected \$660,000 from the corporation. In 1966, when the corporation moved to Westwood, the city budget was a little more than \$60,000. Westwood residents have paid no city (property) taxes in six years.

Christopher Miller, mayor of Westwood Hills, said animosity stemming from a police domain dispute 10 years ago between the two municipalities was part of the cause for defeat.

Miller said that animosity had died in Westwood Hills but he said he guessed that old resentments were alive still among some voters.

He predicted another merger effort would be launched later this year to "re-educate" residents in both cities to the advantages of consolidation.