

Contentious merger plan advances in Suffolk

As reported on 7/31/2013 by Newsday

Suffolk lawmakers Tuesday authorized a controversial referendum that would merge the county's elected treasurer and comptroller, and eliminate the job of County Executive Steve Bellone's onetime political foe.

The county Legislature voted 12-3, with two abstentions and one member absent, to put the measure on the November ballot, after a large crowd again showed up, with some to lobby for, and some against, a merger.

But Treasurer Angie Carpenter -- who would lose her job at year's end -- vowed to sue.

She said lawmakers didn't follow proper procedure in bypassing a committee action to get the bill considered by the full legislature.

"I would be remiss to the voters of the county if I didn't challenge this," Carpenter said.

Bellone, a Democrat, wants voters to decide whether the county should eliminate the Republican Carpenter's position and four others on her staff, and fold the remaining employees into the office of Republican Comptroller Joseph Sawicki. The administration said the merger would save \$833,000 in salaries and benefits next year, but critics have questioned that estimate.

Sawicki, who otherwise must leave office next year due to term limits, would be interim head of the new department in 2014 and be allowed to run for election under the new title, chief financial officer. Carpenter, who lost to Bellone in the 2011 county executive race, said the move would imperil "checks and balances" that her office provides over county finances.

"It's pure politics," said Legis. Kate Browning (WF-Shirley), one of the abstentions.

But Legis. Tom Barraga (R-West Islip), a bill supporter, said: "There are members here that have serious issues with the merits of this proposal, and I understand that. But I also understand that where that exists, the best course of action is the public referendum."

Carpenter said she wasn't against letting voters decide on issues, but complained that Bellone never studied her office's operations before recommending a merger, and that the referendum language is written in a leading way, to suggest that it would improve efficiency.

"The issue is complicated," Carpenter said. "It deserves a full vetting, and a proposition whose language is clear, concise and not steered in one direction or the other."

Before the vote, nearly 40 residents weighed in on the merger plan, but this time, they were nearly split. Last week, opponents far outnumbered supporters. Supporters Tuesday echoed Bellone's call to let voters decide whether to "streamline government." Opponents continued calls for independent financial officers and said authorizing the referendum is akin to supporting rank-and-file layoffs, since two of the five impacted workers pay union dues despite being appointees.