Incumbent Olson faces off against challenger for Town of Merton Board supervisor

By Karen Pilarski
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MERTON — Incumbent James Olson is running for reelection against newcomer Jan Grimm for Town of Merton supervisor. Olson declined to participate in The Freeman's request to answer the same set of questions asked of Grimm. Here are Grimm's answers.

FREEMAN: How would you improve transparency between the Village Board and voters — especially around budgets, ordinances, and major local decisions?

Grimm: The public would definitely benefit from improvements in the sharing of information by the Town Board and town Clerk's office. I would advocate for: better organization of the town website including keeping the calendar up to date and accurate; broadcast of Town Board meetings on a Town of Merton YouTube channel or something similar; semi-annual town hall/public forum meetings to inform and hear concerns from residents of the Town of Merton; and posting of meeting minutes in a timely manner — minutes should be approved, via email, by board members, and posted within 5 days. This goes for Town Board and Plan Commission meetings. Video recording of meetings would help to improve efficiency.

FREEMAN: How should the council/board handle proposed rezoning or development projects that concern neighbors (e.g., density changes, traffic impacts)?

Grimm: If there is a significant development that will impact zoning changes and/or water resources, it should be clearly communicated on the website and in the newsletter. Annexation of the Arrowhead campus out of the Town of Merton and into Hartland is a perfect example. Residents need to know the "how" and the "why" regarding the annexation. Does it fit with the long-term strategic plan of the town? Who benefits the most? Subdivision development projects should be clearly communicated via the website and newsletter, including a map detailing the location of the land development under consideration.

FREEMAN: How should the board respond if there is strong disagreement in the community about proposed local ordinances?

Grimm: Clear communication and healthy debate between stakeholders is critical. Compromise is necessary in a functioning government. The Town Board should be proactive when it comes to updating ordinances and regulations. For example, as short-term vacation rentals (VRBOs, AirBnBs) grow in popularity in our community, the town should be proactively establishing zoning ratios so that we can control the density of these types of properties. Should subdivisions in the town abide for noise and light regulations? Should the town establish a wake boarding ordinance rather that leaving it to each individual lake association or district?

FREEMAN: What are your top two budget priorities for this area, and what would you be willing to reduce or delay to fund them?

Grimm: Two of the biggest challenges with the town's budget are inflation and the rapid growth in costs for our fire protection. Since joining the Western Lakes Fire and Rescue (WLFR) enterprise, expenditures are up over 200%, warranting a comprehensive evaluation of the financial and service impacts of this decision.

At the same time, both recurring operating expenses and capital outlays should be reviewed carefully to identify potential cost-saving opportunities. Where appropriate, the town should also pursue available federal and state grants to help offset expenses and support priority investments.

FREEMAN: How will you ensure residents understand where their tax dollars are going?

Grimm: My business career required me to make the complex, understandable. A budget can and should be made understandable to our citizens. We should also explain how current trends in funding are impacting our annual tax bill. This subject should be discussed in a town hall forum open to the public. All municipalities are facing budget challenges. Planning for what's ahead is a critical part of the Town Board supervisor's leadership. Regular assessment of the partnership with Western Lakes Fire and Rescue and the village of Lac LaBelle public safety should be conducted to analyze whether it is fiscally beneficial to the town and to taxpayers.

Town of Merton Board

Jan Grimm



Age: 65
Occupation: retired wealth adviser (former certified financial planner)
Years lived in town: Resident of the Town of Merton since 1997, native of Michigan
Previous elected office: None

James Olson (i)

Declined to participate