

In Deep: On Breakaway Island, They Secede From City

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People on tiny Long Island got so angry about rising taxes they seceded from Maine's largest city. Now the 160 residents face the sobering reality of life without a safety net.

They must set up a government, tackle state and federal rules and regulations and take responsibility for a two-room schoolhouse when the island incorporates July 1. And the tax relief they sought is years away.

"We're looking at three to five years of hell," said Cynthia Steeves, an islander taking the 45-minute, 4 -mile ferry ride home across Casco Bay. "We're willing to stay the course."

The islanders revolted after the city's revaluation doubled, tripled and even quadrupled the property taxes of some and ignited fears that their home could become a vacation haven for the rich.

They voted 3-to-1 for secession on Election Day.

Long Islanders escaped Portland's rule but not its indebtedness. An arbitration panel ruled that the new town must pay part of Portland's short- and long-term debt in return for past services.

Its share will be about \$ 163,300 in its first year of independence, second in town spending only to the projected \$ 237,600 school budget.

That will make first-year taxes about the same as those in Portland and much more than other island towns in Maine. Taxes are not expected to show an appreciable drop for five years.

But islanders who say they've been ignored by city government decided they couldn't do any worse on their own.

"The city has never appreciated the islands for their uniqueness and they have never appreciated the islands as an asset," said Nancy Jordan, a co-leader of the secession movement.

Phillip Conkling, executive director of the non-profit Island Institute in Rockland, said the vote assures Long Island's liveability in the future. The big question, he said, is whether the other five Casco Bay islands that are part of Portland will follow suit.

With hundreds of islands on its coast, Maine has more islands inhabited year-round than any other East Coast state. The number of islands with year-round communities - those that support a school - has dropped from about 300 at the turn of the century to 14 today, Conkling said.

Long Island's isolation means a tight-knit community. The residents have used their closeness advantage in the past - successfully fighting an oil company's threat to set up a tanker terminal on the island in the 1960s and twice fighting the city's efforts to close the school.

"You're a different person if you live out here. You have to be innovative," Steeves said.

City Manager Robert Ganley said the city has tried to balance the interests of its 1,300 islanders with 60,000 mainland residents. But he said he understands their frustration.

"I think they exercised their right to do what they want to do. Time will tell whether it works out," Ganley said.