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Attrition urged as way to lessen political bloat

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Civic activist Kevin P. Gaughan is urging the leaders of Erie County's 45 local governments to not replace every elected official who retires during the next 10 years.

Gaughan spoke to more than 100 listeners Wednesday evening in Hallwalls at the Church, 341 Delaware Ave., elaborating on his new report, "Paying Our Politicians: What 439 Elected Officials Cost Us."

The report, gathered by 10 University at Buffalo law students and supported by the Oishei Foundation, concludes that Erie County has up to 10 times as many politicians as comparable regions in the country. All those positions cost taxpayers \$32 million a year in salaries and benefits, for a total of \$250 million over the last decade.

In the next three weeks, Gaughan and the law students plan to visit village and town boards across the county and ask them to sign what he calls a Regional Compact.

"For the next 10 years, the next time people retire - as a town council member or village trustee - we just don't fill it," Gaughan said. "And through attrition, we abolish those seats and reduce the number of politicians. It can be done."

He said Buffalo, Erie County and the Town of Tonawanda have all reduced the size of their legislative bodies, although it was with voter approval.

"The good news is that if we're doing it to ourselves, we can fix it ourselves," he said. "We don't need to change the State Constitution to do it."

When Buffalo residents want a pothole filled, Gaughan said, they call their Common Council member, not their Streets Department. "You've got to go to the politicians to get something done," he said. "But that old urban system has seeped into the suburbs. . . . The suburbs have the most politicians per resident."

The report lists every elected official's title and salary in the county but does not include any names. Most of the positions are technically part time.

Gaughan traced this region's overpopulation of politicians to the inception of the nation, when states in the Northeast chose to govern themselves locally by towns, while those in the South chose larger parishes, or counties. In this region, he said, they did both.

To a suggestion that "people like being overrepresented, with more politicians to help me out," Gaughan replied: "As long as we continue to look at our government as OK while eight miles away our brothers and sisters are sending their special-education teachers home and their schools are crumbling, it's not right."

Gaughan has made a reputation as an advocate for regional government. But he said he no longer uses the word "regionalism" because it was "demonized" by opponents.

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