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COMMENTARY

Bruce Andriatch: Amherst looks in mirror on downsizing

By Bruce Andriatch
News Columnist

Nine months ago, when Amherst lawmakers were debating whether to eliminate two members from the seven-member Town Board, Council Member Deborah Bruch Bucki voted against the idea, with a caveat: If it were to be done, it should be done over time by attrition.

Who knew then that she was talking about herself?

Bucki's election last week as town clerk, which means she will be required to resign from the board, should immediately restart the downsizing conversation in Amherst. It is possible that voters could decide whether they want to shed two elected officials in the next election.

If any town should be thinking about it, it's Amherst.

Almost every other community in Erie County makes do with five-member boards. There will be one more soon: Voters in Lancaster last week approved a plan to cut two trustees from their seven-member Village Board.

Regionalism advocate Kevin Gaughan has spent the better part of the last year arguing that even five is too many, that three is the magic number. He came close to getting a vote on the question in West Seneca, but otherwise that idea has not gotten much traction, partly because — the argument goes — it leaves less margin for error and more potential for corruption.

So what's the argument against going from seven to five in Amherst? In a nutshell, two officials would lose jobs.

But in Amherst, circumstances make that argument a moot point this year.

At the moment, three seats are set to be on the ballot next November, in addition to the town supervisor's post

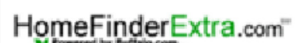


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held by Satish Mohan: those held by Bucki, Shelly Schratz and Daniel Ward. Unless she decides that she doesn't like being town clerk and wants her old job back, Bucki will not be running for the board. Schratz already has said she will not run.

The board will likely name Bucki's successor in January, and that person must serve the remainder of her term. There's nothing that says the person has to run for a full four-year term, so the board could choose someone who agrees to serve for just one year.

Presto: two vacancies. Before the public could decide whether to shrink the board, the board would have to agree to hold a public vote on that question.

Dennis Ward, who is both the town Democratic chairman and Erie County's Democratic elections commissioner, as well as Daniel Ward's brother, said that in such a scenario, a special election would have to be held by the end of May.

"That would be expensive," he said. "The problem is, then you crank up all the voting machines and [pay] all the elections inspectors. It's tens of thousands of dollars."

But that's a one-time cost. How many tens of thousands of dollars would Amherst save if it did not have to pay two additional board members and the costs associated with each?

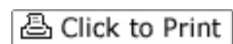
That's what Amherst will have to decide. And it's up to the board, not the public. The West Seneca initiative was started by the public in the face of opposition from the Town Board, but that can be done when the question is going from five to three members, Dennis Ward said. When a board wants to go from seven to five members, the initiative has to come from the government.

The voters apparently are ready for this change. At least they were in Lancaster. Of the roughly 2,500 people who cast ballots, more than 90 percent were for downsizing.

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