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COMMENTARY

Bruce Andriatch: Be careful what you say in Blasdell

By Bruce Andriatch

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Kevin Gaughan is used to a certain level of unpopularity among elected officials. Such is life when you spend your time telling people why they — or at least their jobs — are irrelevant.

Yet even he was taken aback by what happened in Blasdell last week. And his experience there says plenty about why it will be no easy task to make significant changes to the way Western New York is governed.

Gaughan, who has barnstormed the region pushing the idea that every municipal board could be reduced by two members, arrived in Blasdell last Wednesday fresh from with his greatest success to date: He had just learned that the Village of North Collins would consider dissolution. As a result, Gaughan was now amending his message, proposing that village governments shouldn't just consider downsizing; they should contemplate elimination.

The idea got a lukewarm reception two nights earlier in the Village of Hamburg. Maybe Blasdell residents would have applauded, maybe they would have told Gaughan to take a hike. He never got to find out.

By Gaughan's account, shortly after he arrived at Village Hall, Mayor Ernest Jewett took him into a back room. Gaughan said he had a feeling he would like to have witnesses for whatever was about to happen, so he invited the two University at Buffalo law students he had with him, Lindsay Heckler and Dan Lesniewski, to join him.

Jewett then told Gaughan to confine his remarks to downsizing the five-member Village Board.

"He said that I could not use the word 'consolidation' or 'dissolution' in my presentation," Gaughan later wrote on his blog. "If I did, he would end the meeting and have me removed from the hall."

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Heckler and Lesniewski confirmed Gaughan's account. Heckler said she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"I was kind of saddened to hear that a public servant of a local [village] would actually try to restrict freedom of speech," Heckler said.

Asked about the matter the following day, Jewett offered this response: "Mr. Gaughan was invited to speak about his previous presentations to all the boards, village and town. And he was told that it was the unanimous decision of the [Blasdell] Board of Trustees that he was welcome to talk about downsizing, and he was told he was not allowed to talk about dissolving the village."

Why is that?

"Why *is* that?" Jewett said, repeating the question as if shocked that it needed to be asked. "Because the village is willing to listen to any way that we can better serve our constituents, but that's a decision that the board feels is up to the village residents and the board."

The mayor noted that Blasdell already has taken steps to consolidate some services, including merging its building department with the Town of Hamburg's. And he is open to other ways to save taxpayers money.

Asked if refusing to allow a speaker to use a word or espouse an idea might have been overkill, Jewett reiterated that Gaughan was invited to speak about downsizing.

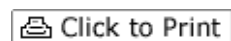
There are legitimate reasons to disagree with Kevin Gaughan. He has never been elected to public office, for one, so it's difficult to know if he speaks for anyone but himself.

Some people like his ideas, though. The mayor of North Collins is one. He said merging could be a more efficient, effective way of governing. It's an interesting idea. But he might want to think twice before talking about it in Blasdell.

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