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COMMENTARY

Bruce Andriatch: Change is in the eye of the beholder

Bruce Andriatch

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Nathan Gontarz, 22, serves as an unofficial political adviser to his father, Richard. Here's how it works: The son gives the father advice on how to win; the father pays no attention and loses.

When Richard Gontarz ran for mayor of Alden four years ago, his son — then a student at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point — advised him to tell the voters what they wanted to hear. Richard ignored him and lost.

This year, when Gontarz ran again, he decided he would run on a platform of change, specifically that it was time to merge the town and village governments. His son told him not to do that. You can probably guess the rest.

"I don't know why we have to have 17 elected officials in a town of less than 13,000," Richard Gontarz said last week. "And [Nathan] said that's a ridiculous amount, but he said everyone thinks that's fine. I don't. I have a hard time with that. It must be me."

Reducing the size of government is a chic belief to have these days, thanks to the relentless efforts of Kevin Gaughan, who has pushed the idea that the number of people on every town and village board could be cut by two. You don't have to look far to find someone who believes that government is bloated and that something should be done about it. But you will have a very hard time finding someone willing to run for office with the stated goal that he or she will work to merge one government with another.

Gontarz has lived in Alden for 18 years, the last six in the village. If residents don't know him from his work as a scoutmaster with Troop 117, or as the president of the local soccer league, they may know him as the guy who is one of the few Americans to complete the world's largest jigsaw puzzle, which garnered him some publicity a few years ago.

When he's not doing any of those activities, he works on the third shift as a processor at H.C. Brill, a Lancaster plant that makes icings, fillings and other bakery ingredients.

The one thing he is not is a politician, which helps explain why he is also not preparing to take the oath of office to become mayor of Alden.

His 2004 campaign featured almost no platform and no agenda. His campaign buzzword could have been "spite." He said the previous mayor, Michael Retzlaff, blocked his attempts to build a deck on the front of his house. Gontarz was angry, so he ran against him. He didn't win, but he got enough votes to keep the mayor from winning re-election.

"I just wanted him out, and he got out," Gontarz said.

This time, he decided to run by promising change. His son/adviser liked that idea. But Richard said he wanted to be specific; he wanted to run on a promise that he would try to merge the town and village governments.

"He said, 'Dad, if you tell people what you want to do, it's political suicide,' " Richard said. "I said, 'Nate, I have to do this.' "

When the votes were counted last week, the winner was former Mayor Richard Kegler, who defeated incumbent Michael Kubik. Gontarz finished a distant third.

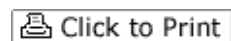
"I was disappointed but relieved," he said. "I wanted it. I really went out for it. I tried. Again, I didn't listen to my son. I should have listened to him. But in my heart, I said we can't keep telling people what they want to hear."

As it turns out, Gontarz was right in his belief that Alden voters were ready for a change. They just weren't ready for his kind of change.

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