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COMMENTARY

Bruce Andriatch: Little Cherry Valley votes for bigger board

By **Bruce Andriatch**

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Things are a little different in Cherry Valley, a community of about 1,300 people 30 minutes from Cooperstown. Try to contact an elected official there in the afternoon, and you hear this message: “Hi. You’ve reached the Cherry Valley village office. Hours are 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Please leave a message.”

If you wonder why a local government office would be open for only half a day, it starts to make sense once you learn that Cherry Valley, when compared with the communities of Western New York, is roughly half a government.

But it won’t be for much longer.

After 28 years of operating with three members, the Cherry Valley Town Board next year will expand to five members. The reason, according to Supervisor Tom Garretson, is that even in a community that is roughly 1/100th the size of Amherst, three board members did not effectively represent the town.

That’s exactly the opposite of what Kevin Gaughan has been arguing across Erie County.

Gaughan is working to force a public vote in West Seneca to trim the board from five to three members. If it gets on the ballot and if residents approve, the board would be the smallest in Western New York.

Gaughan has argued that elected officials are involved in decisions that could be better made by department heads, while elected officials should focus on policy and budgets.

That idea is not hypothetical in Cherry Valley. The village Board has had three members for as long as anyone can remember; the Town Board since 1981.



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But Garretson said having three members on the Town Board left too little margin for error. If one member became sick for a prolonged period or if one member decided to head south for the winter, “That would leave me with just one other guy.”

Looking at it with a more sinister eye, if two people were elected who had something other than the town’s best interests at heart, the third member would be virtually powerless to stop them.

It came to a head when a wind turbine developer started eyeing Cherry Valley. The issue divided the town, and suddenly it didn’t seem wise to have only three people making what would be a far-reaching and potentially community-changing decision.

So the board passed a resolution calling for the addition of two members in the 2009 election.

“I think we’re doing the right thing,” Garretson said. “I don’t care what size the town is. And I would think for the larger town, you would want those five.”

Gaughan has heard those arguments over and over as he has made his case for downsizing. First, he has seen examples of board meetings being canceled because three of the five members could not attend. Rather than assume that fewer members would lead to more cancellations, he believes officials would be less likely to miss meetings when they know their absence would cause problems.

As for the likelihood that it would be too easy for corruption to flourish on a three-person board, Gaughan said: “The prospect for untoward behavior is not a matter of the number of politicians, but a question of their character.”


But Cherry Valley has decided that five is better than three when it comes to the Town Board. Meanwhile in the village, a former trustee named Louis Guido has been arguing that the village and town should merge into one entity. But that effort hasn’t gotten very far, and he said one reason is resistance from officials who don’t want to give up power.

Maybe things aren’t all that different in Cherry Valley.

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