

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

## Opinion

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### Counting the politicians

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**Governmental survey tallies costs of a populous political culture**

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Civic activist Kevin Gaughan's latest project adds a valuable tool to the toolbox of anyone working toward the restructuring of local government. The project report puts numbers to the widely held belief that this area is overripe with politicians and the people who work for them.

"Paying Our Politicians: What 439 Elected Officials Cost Us," was compiled by 10 University at Buffalo Law students and supported by the Oishei Foundation. It provides a metric for measuring waste.

This area has two to 10 times the number of politicians as any other comparable city and region in America. Greater Buffalo seems to have a bit more use for politicians than, say, Greater Indianapolis, Greater Charlotte, Greater Baltimore and even New York City.

The study shows that those 439 politicians, with the highest concentration in the suburbs, and their immediate staffs consume \$32.1 million a year in salaries and benefits, or more than \$250 million since 1996. That's a lot of money for projects and programs.

Gaughan's answer is to try to persuade governments throughout the region to downsize by two board or council seats during the next decade. As unlikely as that sounds, one suburb already has taken that step; Tonawanda residents voted Tuesday to reduce their Town Board from six to four members.

A veteran of several regionalism initiatives, Gaughan says creating consensus for change here is like raking water up a hill. The region is thoroughly balkanized into myriad jurisdictions and the political system is deeply entrenched.

But change starts with measurement. This report, available at [www.TheCost.org](http://www.TheCost.org), shows elected leaders cost an average of \$35 a year for every person in Erie County. And that just covers pay and benefits for the politicians and their immediate staffs. Rakes, anyone?