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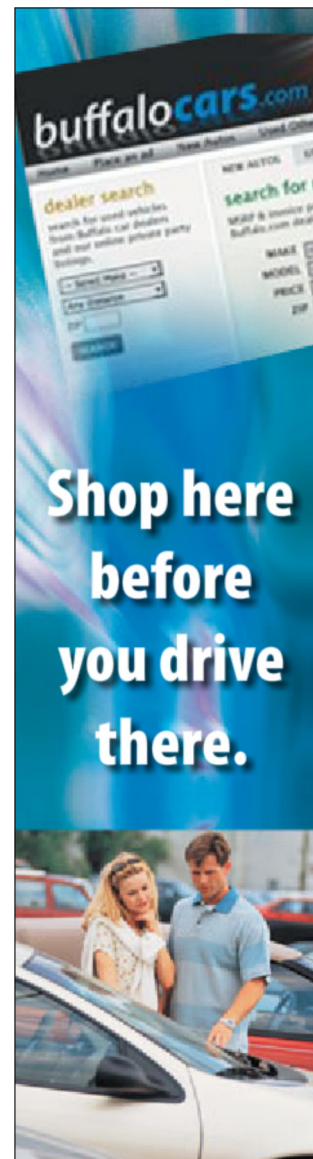
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New York State Attorney General Andrew Cuomo speaks to promote his government consolidation plan in O'Brian Hall on the University at Buffalo North Campus in Amherst on Thursday.

Charles Lewis/Buffalo News



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NEW YORK STATE

Cuomo says downturn is good reason to downsize

By Jay Rey
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

State Attorney General Andrew M. Cuomo brought his proposal for reducing local government to Buffalo on Thursday.

Cuomo spoke at the University at Buffalo Law School on the North Campus, where he outlined a plan that would empower citizens to eliminate costly and redundant layers of government.

"I know change is hard," Cuomo said, "but I don't know if you have another alternative. I don't know if [New York] can afford the old structure and remain competitive."

New York, Cuomo said, has at least 10,521 local government entities across the state — counties, towns, school districts, authorities, special districts — that can tax and assess fees for everything from town lighting to sewage systems.

He is proposing a change to state law that would allow 10 percent of voters — or 5,000 voters, whichever is less — to petition a local entity to begin the dissolution or consolidation process.

If approved by local voters, the entity would have to dissolve or consolidate.

This wouldn't apply to counties or cities. County governments, however, would have the power to dissolve local entities, contingent on a countywide vote.

The entities themselves could also start the process, which would be subject to a referendum.

The way the law is written now, it's virtually impossible to do anything about all these layers of government, Cuomo said.

And there is no real willingness to do anything, either, he said.

"The political infrastructure doesn't want to do it," Cuomo said. "People who have power don't like to give up power."

Cuomo has been touring the state to build support for the idea before introducing a bill in Albany.

Cuomo on Thursday was surrounded by several state lawmakers from the Western New York delegation — Democrats and Republicans — who threw their support behind the plan.

"This is a no-brainer, if you believe we need to reduce the tax burden on the taxpayers of New York," said Assemblyman Sam Hoyt, D-Buffalo, chairman of the Assembly Committee on Local Government.

Others in attendance were State Sen. William Stachowski, D-Lake View; State Sen. Dale Volker, R-Depew; Assemblywoman Francine DelMonte, D-Lewiston; Assemblyman Mark Schroeder, D-Buffalo; and Erie County Comptroller Mark Poloncarz.

Cuomo's proposal, though, joins a long list of ideas to cut government costs over the decades, only to be beaten back. Regionalism advocate Kevin Gaughan has been trying to rally public support for the downsizing of town and village boards as a step toward consolidating local governments.

What's different now?

"Now that the bottom has fallen out, I think more people may be willing to shed the past and embrace visionary concepts," said Joel A. Giambra, who pushed these efforts as county executive and heard Cuomo's presentation Thursday. "I think Andrew Cuomo has the talent and the leadership skills to bring this concept to fruition."

jrey@buffnews.com

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