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Cut the Legislature

Plan to reduce number of lawmakers deserves support from officials

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Shrinking the Erie County Legislature from 15 members to nine is an excellent idea. The specific way that one legislator would redraw the legislative map is an even better one.

The political momentum to shrink the county's lawmaking body to conform to the age of cutbacks and layoffs that has affected so many of the Legislature's constituents is growing, now claiming five current members of the panel as supporters.

Salary and benefits for each legislator total about \$48,500, but that figure doesn't count thousands more tax dollars spent on staff and district offices. Reducing the size of the Legislature would help to convince hard-pressed taxpayers that their county government was doing what it could to trim costs and do more with less.

Most worthy of praise, though, may be the specific plan offered by Legislator Thomas A. Loughran, D-Amherst, with community activist Kevin Gaughan. Rather than have members of the Legislature draw the new districts, which could put them in a position of fighting over partisan advantage or personal turf, the plan would have the Legislature appoint an independent nine-member commission to create the new legislative map.

Legislative redistricting, on the local or state level, is too often a platform for the most brazen forms of partisanship. Lines are drawn in absurd ways to protect incumbents or to keep certain districts so overwhelmingly in the camp of one or the other party that elections, after the primary, hardly matter. Lawmakers so elected — say, for example, members of the New York Legislature — are so firmly ensconced in their seats that they need pay little heed to demands for reform or improvements.

Shrinking the County Legislature would be particularly difficult if lawmakers did it themselves. Unless several of them are planning to retire at the same time, chances are that more than one lawmaker seeking re-election would find themselves running against a fellow incumbent.



The proposed independent commission could provide new districts that are basically equal in population, as the Constitution requires, carved out in ways that make geographic and demographic sense but don't concern themselves with partisan advantage or incumbent preservation.

Once done successfully, such a process should serve as a good example for other legislative bodies — say, for example, members of the New York Legislature.

The idea is to have the commission do its work, have its recommendations accepted by the Legislature and then put to a public vote so that the new, smaller policy-making body would be seated at the beginning of 2011.

The basic idea of reducing the Legislature is now backed by all three of the body's Republicans— John J. Mills of Orchard Park, Michael H. Ranzenhofer of Amherst and Edward

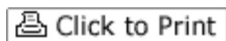
A. Rath III of Williamsville — and two of its Democrats, Loughran and Kathy Konst of Lancaster.

Saving the salaries of six legislators, the pay and upkeep of their staff members and their district offices would save taxpayers some money. It would be better still if all of the district offices, a pointless affectation when County Hall is within easy reach and most information is available online, were eliminated.

This is one downsizing that can be accomplished without appreciable pain. It should proceed.

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