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Donn Esmonde: Gaughan's downsizing campaign goes door-to-door

Donn Esmonde

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Democracy spread Wednesday night through West Seneca's neighborhoods. It came knocking just after dinner at the door of Jack Gunning's tidy, one-story house.

Democracy came with a smiling face and holding a clipboard. It came in the person of Gunning's friend and neighbor John Canorro. He asked Gunning — 86, lean, with lively eyes — a simple question: Would he sign a petition to let people vote on whether to cut the size of the Town Board?

Gunning did not have to be asked twice. He reached for the pen and wrote his name.

"Let the people decide," said Gunning, a retired marine engineer. "We have too many politicians feeding at the public trough."

Thus began the next phase of civic leader Kevin Gaughan's countywide assault on oversized government. Having presented his downsizing argument to all 41 town and village boards over the last year, Gaughan — the Hamburgbred, Harvard-educated attorney — now is taking it to the streets.

Most town and village board members, predictably, resisted Gaughan's call to cut themselves down to size. Gaughan's Plan B is to gather enough petition signatures in numerous towns and villages to put the downsizing question on the November ballot. It lets folks decide whether they can live with fewer politicians. It puts power where it belongs — in the hands of the people.

West Seneca, where Supervisor Wally Piotrowski backs Gaughan's call for downsizing, is first on the petitioning list.

Judging by what I saw Wednesday night, folks are eager to have their say. All nine of the people Canorro approached while I was with him signed the petition.

"I agree with what Gaughan is trying to do," Gunning said. "We have too many people working in government."

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It is tough to dispute the oversized-government argument. According to Gaughan's recent study (www.The-Cost.org), Erie County has 341 elected officials — 10 times as many as the Baltimore region and five times more than the economic hothouse of Charlotte. Supporting the load annually costs taxpayers \$32 million.

The bulk of the overkill is in the suburbs. A village resident, for instance, is represented by a village mayor, a village board, a town supervisor, a town board, a county legislator, a state senator, an Assembly member and on and on.

"We have representatives for our representatives," Canorro's neighbor Cindy Miller said as she signed the petition. "We don't need all of them."

The overpopulation of politicians costs us not just in salaries, benefits and staff. It costs us, Gaughan argues, in muddled vision and in idea-choking bureaucracy.

You do not have to convince Canorro. He is 73, a retired truck driver with an easy smile. He sees the cracks in his neighborhood as jobs disappear and younger people flee. He and his wife, Frances — along with about a dozen others — volunteered to carry petitions after seeing Gaughan on the TV news.

"I retired 15 years ago, and my pension has not gone up a dime since," Canorro said. "When you've got politicians asking people making \$20,000 a year to give them a raise, something does not quite fit."

The sentiment was echoed up and down the block.

Paul Izzi is a construction worker with a couple of pickups parked in his driveway. "The politicians have a good thing going," he said. "They don't want to change it."

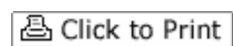
No, the politicians do not want to change it. But it should not be up to them. If Gaughan has his way, it will not be.

First, West Seneca, then Western New York. Petition by petition, door by door, democracy knocks.

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