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COMMENTARY

Donn Esmonde: Village sees the light on downsizing

By Donn Esmonde

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He laid it out for them at a Village Board meeting. He told the seven trustees that they were not all needed. That we are smothering under a glut of elected officials, layer upon layer. That *they* are part of the problem.

They told civic leader Kevin Gaughan that it was not true — that the Village of Lancaster needed all of them. Thanks for coming, and goodbye forever.

But wait. In the last two months, most of the trustees in Lancaster changed their minds. Barring the unforeseen, the village will soon jettison two board members, reducing the number to five.

“It’s the right thing to do,” said Trustee Gary Ambrose, who will lose his seat.

What happened between then and now is simply this: Seven men looked at the facts. They listened to the people who elected them. They saw a bigger picture than political self-preservation.

The bigger picture shows a county with 439 — count ’em — elected officials. Communities doing far better than us make do with far fewer politicians, from 60 in Charlotte to 33 in greater Baltimore.

“We’re trying to create public environment for private investment,” Gaughan said.

Gaughan has made a study (www.thecost.org) of the number of local elected officials and what they cost us in dollars and in blurred regional vision. He is taking the message to about 40 town and village boards, urging them to cut their numbers.

Trustees predictably react as if he wants to torch Town Hall. Cheektowaga’s board did not let Gaughan speak until long after most folks had left. Amherst’s board made him stuff an 18-minute presentation into a 10-minute hole.

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“The main voices in opposition to [downsizing] are elected officials,” said Bill Cansdale, Lancaster’s village mayor. “They are trying to keep [Gaughan] away from the public.”

Although at first chilly to Gaughan’s idea, Lancaster’s trustees — four of whom met with me Wednesday — thought about the message and listened to the people who elected them.

“[Gaughan] makes valid points,” Trustee Bill Schroeder said. “It’s hard to justify all of these positions.”

Cansdale added, “At this level, we’re focused on our little world — sidewalk repair programs, balancing the budget. We don’t tend to see the bigger picture.”

The bigger picture consumes us — high taxes and a decades-long exodus to greener job pastures. Folks are tired of it.

“People told me, ‘It’s about time you’re doing something like this,’ ” Schroeder said of the board cuts.

Cansdale said, “People at the supermarket grabbed me by the arm and said, ‘Keep going, you’re doing the right thing.’ ”

Cutting numbers on village and town boards will not solve our larger ills. The job-killing rules, regulations and publicworker costs that drive up taxes are mostly traceable to Albany. But cutting the size of local government saves us money, sharpens our vision and is something we have the power to do.

Lancaster would merely be the latest to sign on. In recent years, the Erie County Legislature and governing boards in Buffalo, Tonawanda and Depew cut their numbers. The self-liposuctions relieved taxpayers of unneeded salaries, staff and benefits. It streamlined government badly in need of a regional vision. If we are smart, it is just the start.

“The region is slowly dying,” Cansdale said. “There is a tremendous effort by elected officials to maintain the status quo. Why put the effort into something that is not working?”

When something is not working, change it. In Lancaster, they will.

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