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Downsizing in Amherst on agenda for tonight

Poll shows mostback smaller board

By Sandra Tan
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

A resolution to downsize the Amherst Town Board is once again making an appearance on tonight's meeting agenda. And this time, it's backed by a poll showing that three-fourths of town residents support cutting the board from seven members to five.

The poll, which surveyed 400 town voters Jan. 14, and was done by Barry Zeplowitz and Associates, a well-regarded political polling firm that is based in Amherst but does polling work nationwide.

Survey participants were asked, "Do you support or oppose downsizing the Amherst Town Board from seven members to five?"

The results showed that nearly half of those polled — 49 percent — "strongly support" board downsizing, and another 25 percent "somewhat support" it. Only 10 percent of those surveyed oppose downsizing, and 17 percent were undecided.

"The polling data did surprise me," said Council Member Guy Marlette, one of the sponsors of tonight's downsizing resolution. "The number of people who supported downsizing was more than I thought it would be."

The resolution being introduced by Marlette and fellow Council Member Barry Weinstein once again calls for a referendum to allow town voters to decide whether they want to reduce the size of the board by two members.

Zeplowitz said his poll found strong support for downsizing across all party lines.

"When you have such a high percentage of voters supporting or opposing something, it cuts across all demographic groups and reflects a strong feeling about it," he said. "If it gets on the ballot, people will vote for downsizing. That's it."

This is the fourth time since January of last year that a downsizing resolution has been proposed in Amherst. And there are no early signs to indicate that tonight's resolution stands a better chance of passing than the other three.

Marlette and Weinstein, however, are hoping that the results of the Zeplowitz poll might place more pressure on board members who have voiced their opposition to a smaller board.

Earlier votes, however, suggest that the resolution could once again fail along a party- line vote, with Democratic Council Members Mark Manna, Daniel Ward and Supervisor Satish Mohan voting against the resolution, and Republicans Weinstein, Marlette and Shelly Schratz voting in favor.

One seat on the board is vacant. A tied 3-3 vote would constitute a defeat for the resolution.

Mohan said a town as large as Amherst deserves a seven-member governing body.

"I want to see the legislative wing be very strong, very diverse," he said. "I want it accessible to all the residents of the town and the economy."

He added, "This government makes up policies and monitors all the taxpayers' monies. This wing has to be very powerful, very strong and very effective."

He also said the town can be downsized in other ways, through merging departments and cutting personnel costs through attrition.

Manna called the downsizing effort an attempt to push Democrats off the Town Board by preventing Democratic board members from appointing a replacement for the seat vacated by Deborah Bruch Bucki, a Democrat who was elected town clerk in November.

"This is Barry and Guy being small-minded and only thinking of their own interests instead of the entire town's interests," he said. "They shop for the poll that gives them the answer they want and ignore all others."

If the board reduces to five members, Manna said, what's to prevent the board from later shrinking to three?

"It's a pure power grab," he said of Marlette and Weinstein. "If they've got the nerve to downsize, then do it in the 2011 election, when me, Barry and Guy's seats are up — if they have the guts."

Ward's, Mohan's and Bucki's seats — all held by Democrats — are up for election this fall, as well as Republican Schratz's seat. Schratz is planning to run for the County Legislature's 14th District seat this fall.

Weinstein and Marlette contend, however, that giving the public the right to vote on downsizing is simply the right thing to do.

"People don't like politics, and people don't like their politicians. And based upon that, they'd just as soon downsize us," Weinstein said. "From what I see, the people are right. There are too many politicians making too many bad policy decisions and too many self-serving decisions."

"It's apparent that there's great support for this," Marlette added. "I honestly thought that the polling data would show me 55-45, you know, a closer split. It was pretty lopsided. It made me believe that this is something that the people want to have a say in deciding."

Downsizing advocate Kevin Gaughan said he intends to move forward with a petition drive this year to try to put the downsizing matter in the hands of the courts if the Amherst downsizing resolution fails tonight.

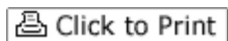
"I'm not going to give up," he said. "I'm going to try every tool at my disposal, particularly as the recession worsens, and as Western New York is faced with more economic challenges, I'm going to do everything I can to

change this system and give taxpayers a break.”

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