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12/16/08 06:20 AM

For third time, board downsizing rebuffed in Amherst

East Aurora hearing on issueshows support for status quoand opposition to referendum

By Sandra Tan and Karen Robinson
NEWS STAFF REPORTERS

The Amherst Town Board narrowly defeated a resolution Monday to craft a law that would downsize the board from seven members to five. The defeat represents the third time this year that the board has failed to approve any downsizing initiative.

In East Aurora, a public hearing Monday drew mixed comment on a similar move to downsize from seven members to five. Many residents, however, urged the board to maintain its size and not seek a referendum to decide the issue. The board took no action but plans to discuss the issue during its Jan. 5 work session.

Downsizing proponents in Amherst — Council Members Barry A. Weinstein, Guy R. Marlette and Shelly Schratz — voted in favor of the resolution, saying a downsizing issue would be put on referendum to allow the people to decide.

“This is one simple issue that the voters should be able to decide,” said Weinstein, the lead sponsor on the downsizing proposal. “This is an issue for all the people of Amherst, not just for the seven of us on the Town Board to decide.”

But Supervisor Satish B. Mohan and Council Members Daniel J. Ward, Mark A. Manna and Deborah Bruch Bucki opposed the resolution, saying that it does not provide for the diversity of representation and opinions needed to govern well in a town as large as Amherst.

Mohan, who at one time reluctantly supported the idea of the downsizing issue going to referendum, hardened his position that downsizing is bad for democracy. He called the resolution “deceitful,” “hyped” and a “convergence to dictatorship.”

He said cutting two part-time positions doesn’t begin to make a dent in the town’s budget.



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“We want diverse opinions,” he said. “We want dilution of power.”

Marlette responded, “ ‘Hyped’? ‘Deceitful’? ‘Dictatorship’? I’m absolutely shocked that you would use those particular words to describe this position . . . when this is simply going to allow residents to have a say in whether they want representation by five or seven.”

Schratz reminded Mohan that he was elected to his seat by the people without the assistance of any political party’s backing. To deny these same voters to decide the size of their board, she said, is “an insult.”

Bucki and Mohan were both considered swing votes on the downsizing resolution. Bucki had a competing resolution that would support downsizing only if the remaining board members would represent specific districts and not be townwide “at-large” representatives as they are now.

But other board members said they would not support a district system, saying such a system would needlessly pit communities against one another.

Kevin P. Gaughan, the activist promoting board

downsizing across the region, rebuked the board for Monday’s actions.

“Tonight, for the third time, the Town Board has said to town citizens, ‘You cannot decide the size and cost of town government,’ ” he said. “I think that’s wrong. I think it’s unjust.”

He added that of many town boards before which he has spoken, Amherst’s board “takes the cake,” and he plans to begin circulating petitions in the spring to legally require the board to downsize.

“One way or another,” he said, “we’re going to let the people decide.”

In the hearing in East Aurora, one resident estimated that it would cost just \$1.50 per resident to keep the board at its current size.

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” said Betty Cheteny, a former village trustee. “I think that it’s working well.”

Local environmental attorney Arthur Giacalone questioned why the board was even considering paring itself. “It looks like not much more than a fad to me,” he said. “One size doesn’t fit all — there’s no outcry from the citizens, so why have a referendum?”

Another former trustee, Keith Bender, is vehemently opposed to downsizing.

“We’re the only community to effectively beat Wal-Mart,” he said. “We’re the Village of East Aurora, and we have a character to maintain. The smaller the board, the quicker we railroad issues and the quicker we lose our board.”

“We need to have the best decisions that we can,” said resident Joan Herold. “Seven heads are better than one in looking at all sides of an issue.”

Mark Warren, chairman of the village’s Historic Preservation Commission, is opposed to any reduction in the board’s size, which includes six trustees and the mayor.

“I’m concerned about the diversity of viewpoints,” he said. “If we downsize to five, which two of you are dispensable voices? I value the input of all seven of you.”

If the issue were put to a referendum and the board was pared to five, it would mean a savings of \$10,000 to the village, since trustees now annually are paid \$5,000 each.

“It’s real money, but a drop in the bucket,” Warren said. “I don’t think trimming you from seven to five is the way to go. I like being able to bend seven ears when I see you on the street.”

However, some said they wouldn’t mind if the issue went to a referendum, which is estimated to cost about \$800 to \$900, not including village staff time to arrange a special election.

“Let’s hear from the people. Put it to a referendum and see,” said John Schaffer.


Gaughan lobbied for East Aurora to put it up for referendum.

“You should place this in the hands of the citizens,” he said. “I hope you recognize that we’re all one community, to rise and fall together.”

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