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ERIE COUNTY LEGISLATURE

Gaughan asks Erie County Legislature for support on downsizing

By Matthew Spina - News Staff Reporter

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Kevin P. Gaughan brought his slide show — documenting Erie County's heart-wrenching and decades-long decline — to the Legislature on Thursday and asked its members to support the downsizing of municipal boards.

“Because you folks downsized several years ago, it seems to me you have the moral authority to ask the towns and villages to do likewise,” said Gaughan, a lawyer who argues that Erie County's rebound depends on its ability to shed overlapping layers of government and lower the tax burden that sends people fleeing to other parts of the country.

Whether the Legislature supports him remains to be seen. Gaughan cranked up his projector in the closing minutes of a long day of committee meetings, and just seven of the 15 lawmakers were in his audience. Some of those who did not attend had seen the presentation before.

One lawmaker bristled at the way Gaughan focused his attention on politicians. But another, Democrat Thomas A. Loughran of Amherst, said that maybe the Legislature should downsize again to set a better example for towns and villages.

“I always give Kevin a lot of credit,” said Legislature Chairwoman Lynn M. Marinelli, D-Town of Tonawanda. “He's a doer and a thinker, and every community should have someone like that.”

Gaughan believes that legislators, by approving a statement he prepared or even pursuing Loughran's suggestion, can persuade municipalities to reduce their numbers of politicians and show that the county is responding to its problems.

“Because the County Legislature is our sole regional body, any reform actions from them would be immensely

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influential,” he said.

“Whatever we are doing to create a prosperous, sustainable community,” Gaughan said, “it’s not working.” For example, he said:

- Since 1970, Erie County has lost 238,000 people.
- Since 1990, it has lost about 40,000 private-sector jobs while adding 7,000 jobs in the public sector.
- In Buffalo, the second-poorest large city in America, there are more residents making less than \$5,000 a year than residents making more than \$50,000 a year.

Gaughan reasons that Erie County’s large numbers of politicians and governments — 25 towns, 16 villages, three cities — stifle progress.

He is traveling to each town and village, plus the cities of Lackawanna and Tonawanda, to urge officials to drop two seats as officeholders retire.

Buffalo’s Common Council has reduced its size, over the years, to nine members. The County Legislature has gone from 20 members to 17 to its present 15. So Gaughan figures the Legislature is in a good position to urge local governments to go along with his suggestion.

But why, Legislator Robert B. Reynolds asked, does Gaughan blame “politicians” for so many of the region’s ills?

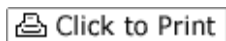
“I don’t want to say it irritates me. But it puts me on the defensive,” said Reynolds, a Democrat from Hamburg who said that elected leaders are only a fraction of the cost of government. Plus, people like the services and the closeness of their town and village halls, he said.

Gaughan said that many politicians are underpaid, considering the time they devote to their jobs. Still, “public servants are not going to be comfortable with the presentation,” he said.

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