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Gaughan challenges officials to downsize

Boards and councils urged to cut 2 seats

By Henry L. Davis NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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Backed by his study of bloated government, Buffalo lawyer and civic activist Kevin Gaughan is launching a drive today to reduce the number of elected officials in Erie County.

Gaughan says he plans to appear before 45 town, village and city boards and councils to challenge them to downsize by eliminating two members through attrition. His first presentation is scheduled for 8 p.m. today in the Village of Lancaster.

“We need to create an economy that will sustain us and help keep young people here, but we’re utterly failing at this task. I’m trying to make a small step toward that goal,” he said.

Gaughan released a study last year on the size of local government in Erie County, consisting of 439 elected leaders and their immediate staffs in 44 villages, towns and cities. Support for that much government costs more than \$32.14 million in salaries and benefits each year.

The study also concluded that the county exceeds other areas in the number of elected officials — twice as many as Indianapolis, five times more than in Charlotte, N.C., and eight times more than in the Baltimore, Md., area, he said.

Gaughan and other advocates of reform maintain that the size of government contrasts starkly with the area’s economic and demographic trends.

Erie County lost nearly a third of its young people during the past decade, posting the highest rate of decline for 25- to 34-year-olds in the nation. The economy remains weak, taxes remain high, and both the county and Buffalo, its largest city, remain under the oversight of state-mandated financial control boards.

“We’ve had to close churches, libraries and hospitals because we couldn’t afford them, yet the political community not only stays the same but continues to grow,” he said. “No one can defend the path this community



is on.”

Gaughan’s newest civic endeavor, is not likely to include much talk of “regionalism,” an idea he has championed for more than a decade.

“A year ago, it became clear that the citizens’ movement I helped initiate to change local government was dead,” he said.

The concept fell from favor because it became identified with County Executive Joel A. Giambra and suffered unfairly during Giambra’s disastrous budget problems in 2004 and 2005, Gaughan said. He also attributes regionalism’s failure to gain traction to the challenge of seeking consensus for change from so many political leaders and entities.

“The cacophony of voices robs us of any clear sense of direction for the community,” Gaughan said.

Some local governments have already slimmed down or have been urged to do so by residents. In 2002, Buffalo voters approved reducing the Common Council to nine from 13 members. Since then, Town of Tonawanda residents voted to eliminate two seats from the seven-member board, a change that will take effect next year, and Depew voters approved cutting the Village Board from seven to five members in 2009.

Gaughan said his new effort, timed to coincide with a new county administration, is not about criticizing local government but encouraging people to see the larger regional failure.

"We need to create a government system that's more in line with similar-sized communities. We need to find new ways to boost rather than burden our economy," he said.

Gaughan's plans drew a mixed reaction from a handful of officials.

In Cheektowaga, which has a seven-member board, Supervisor James J. Jankowiak characterized the effort as well-intentioned but misdirected.

"We're efficiently run. The problem is state mandates and a county government that is inefficient," he said.

Jankowiak advocates a return to a board of supervisors to govern the county.

"The county can't preach regionalism when it can't take care of its own house," he said.

In the Village of Lancaster, another community with a seven-member board, Mayor William Cansdale welcomed Gaughan's efforts but defended the municipality's track record.

"We've been very progressive," he said, citing such cost-cutting actions in recent years as the merger of the village police force with the Town of Lancaster Police Department and the Erie County Water Authority's takeover of supplying water to the village.

He said the village now is looking into the possibility of the Erie County Sewer Authority taking over its sewer system.

"We are accomplishing substantial things that you can see on the bottom line and in taxes. I'm not sure that's necessarily the case with eliminating two positions. That seems like a symbolic gesture," he said.

County Executive-elect Christopher C. Collins said regionalism took on a bad meaning because Giambra sought an unrealistic goal of a single, metropolitan government that local municipalities opposed from the start or turned against as the budget debacle unfolded.

"It goes without saying that if you could take out a blank sheet of paper and redesign government, you wouldn't

duplicate what we have. But it has evolved this way over many years. The fact is it's here," Collins said.

Now, as he prepares to enter office, he said he is focusing on rebuilding trust between the county and its communities, and looking for opportunities to consolidate services.

"If Kevin can drive the message home about reducing costs to taxpayers and get a favorable outcome, I will applaud the effort," Collins said. "But I'll leave it up to local governments to make themselves more efficient. I won't dictate."

After Lancaster, Gaughan's appearances will include next Monday in Amherst, Dec. 5 in the Town of Orchard Park, Dec. 10 in East Aurora and Dec. 17 in Cheektowaga.

His report can be viewed online at www.TheCost.org.

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