

Now available! Build your own Celebrations announcement!

Celebrations



THE BUFFALO NEWS

 **PRINT THIS**

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Gaughan notes pitfalls in state merger report

Sees need to change state law as obstacle

By Patrick Lakamp

Updated: 04/21/08 1:38 PM

The latest report to call for merging cities, villages, towns and school districts looks familiar to regionalism advocate Kevin P. Gaughan.

“So many of their recommendations are ones I’ve made over the years,” Gaughan said of the draft report from the New York State Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness.

But Gaughan noted the pitfalls that made earlier reports from others obsolete — and he warned that could happen to this report.

“By recommending reforms that require changes in New York State law, the commission risks their report meeting the same dusty shelf fate that greeted previous efforts,” Gaughan said.

“That’s why I’m proposing reducing the number of politicians rather than governments, because we can do it without Albany consent,” Gaughan said. “And the degree to which we succeed in downsizing today is the degree to which we set a foundation for consolidation tomorrow.”

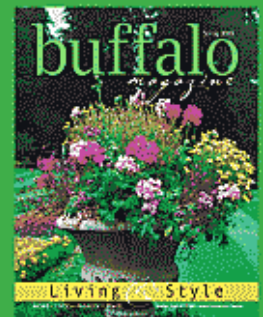
The commission’s final report, expected to be presented in a week to Gov. David A. Paterson, will recommend 76 ways to control spiraling property taxes, according to a draft copy obtained by The Buffalo News.

The Erie County comptroller noted the breadth of the report, from a panel headed by former Lt. Gov. Stan Lundine of Jamestown.

“The Lundine report shows what everybody knows: We just have too much government,” County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz said.

It’ll take a “monumental” effort to change such a huge, complex and cumbersome system, he said.

We want your feedback!



Tell us about your lifestyle and activities!

Click here to take a brief survey and automatically be entered to win a \$500 shopping spree to Eastern Hills Mall!



“I don’t think it’s immediately going to a shelf to collect dust,” Poloncarz said. “We may not see the merger of towns and villages. I’d be surprised if we did. But by letting everyone know the challenge is not in just one part of government, hopefully it’ll spur a discussion that leads folks to realize by working together we can create a better community.”

The report recommends consolidation for cities, towns, villages and the state’s 698 school districts.

Other recommendations include merging industrial development agency offices into regional groups, creating regional jails instead of county-funded jails, permitting collective bargaining agreements to be reopened if local police departments merge and allowing a petition process that residents can use to dissolve or consolidate local governments.

“Every Western New Yorker who hopes for a better future has to be thrilled by the commission’s report,” Gaughan said. “And more importantly, every citizen must now take an active role in overcoming the powerful interests that are going to oppose these appropriate changes.”

“I hope it gets debate and dialogue going in Albany,” said Legislature Chairwoman Lynn M. Marinelli, D-Town of Tonawanda. But for consolidation efforts to succeed, state and local leaders ought to concentrate on gaining smaller victories before trying to merge police departments, she said.

“I think you have to show success,” she added. “Look, the public’s trust in government has eroded. Every level of government has to rebuild that trust. Pursuing doable projects, and showing success and cost efficiencies, will help keep a reform ball rolling here.”

Amherst IDA Chairman Frederick A. Vilonen said the county doesn’t need to merge the six local industrial development agencies into a regional group.

The agencies already agree to a standard set of criteria when evaluating applications and tax incentives, said Vilonen, owner of Ben Brook Farms.

“I think the fact we have a unified policy makes it a regional operation,” Vilonen said. “All of the IDAs within Erie County operate under same criteria and guidelines. We’re essentially operating as a countywide IDA and that should suffice.”

County leaders liked parts of the report.

The report calls for converting town and county positions of highway superintendent, assessor, town clerk, tax receiver and coroner to appointed jobs.

Last month, Poloncarz said eliminating 30 municipal assessing offices and using a centralized system to handle property assessments could save taxpayers millions.

“We think we can save money and have a fairer system by going from a scattershot, town-by-town method to a more unified county system,” he said.

Legislator Timothy M. Wroblewski, D-West Seneca, chairman of the Legislature’s Public Safety Committee, said he’s interested in the idea of creating regional jails instead of relying on county-funded jails.

“I think the county jails are loaded up with people slated for the state penal system, and it’s costing county taxpayers thousands of dollars,” he said. “Anything that can streamline that process and get the burden off the county taxpayers deserves a serious look.”

Wroblewski isn’t convinced merging police departments makes sense.

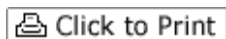
“I will not support any initiative that reduces the number of officers on the street or even slightly puts public safety in jeopardy,” he said.

Marinelli said residents view the issue of police consolidation on the local level the way they view Social Security on the federal level. “They don’t want their public safety tampered with,” she said.

plakamp@buffnews.com

Find this article at:

<http://www.buffalonews.com/cityregion/buffaloerie/story/328171.html>



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

☐ Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.