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Another Voice / Shrinking government

Gaughan's approach ignores the real causes of decline

By Ronald Fraser

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Kevin Gaughan's one-man government reform "movement" hinges on this crucial, but untested, assumption: reducing the number of elected officials in Erie County will save us a lot of money and solve our economic and social problems. Let's take a closer look at his proposal.

In his public meetings with local officials, Gaughan asserts:

- Erie County is slow to change with the economic times because it has too many layers of government.
- Baltimore, Md., and Charlotte, N. C., are prospering because of a lower ratio of elected officials to population.
- The solution is to eliminate two elected officials from the governing boards in each town and village in the county. This, he implies, will bring prosperity back to our region.

Since Erie County prospered in the 1950s with the same number of elected officials as today, it is dangerous to conclude that too many elected officials is the root of our troubles. Could our manufacturing decline be due, instead, to a host of economic forces, such as lower labor costs in union-free Southern states with milder climates?

And it is also risky to suggest, as Gaughan does, that Baltimore and Charlotte are better off because they have fewer elected officials. A region's economic condition is, in fact, determined by a complex interaction of dozens of factors, not a single cause.

The immediate payoff, the money to be saved by eliminating two elected officials in each municipality, is overstated in Gaughan's plan. Shedding two Town of Colden council members at \$4,272 each per year, for example, will "save" \$8,544 in the town's \$2 million budget. Surely, if the real object is to cut costs in Colden we should look elsewhere.

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And what might the unintended consequences of eliminating two council members be for towns and villages? If the workload is unchanged but the number of board members drops by 40 percent, there is a very good chance that the remaining board members will feel overworked and hire one or more staffers to help carry the load.

The annual salary and health benefits for one town secretary run about \$36,000. So, by “saving” \$8,544 up front, we are very likely to increase costs by \$36,000. If new staff members are not hired, the slimmed down board might just ignore important issues and items of business they no longer have the time or energy to address.

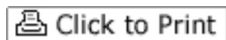
The risk of “group think” with smaller governing boards is another hidden danger. Reducing boards from five to three members could very well lead to fewer new ideas to solve problems if the smaller boards are then dominated by single-minded bullies.

The quality of our elected officials — their resolve to solve problems and put community interests above their own — is the key to solving our problems. Reducing the number of elected officials without improving the quality of those who remain is not a step forward.

Ronald Fraser of Colden has a doctorate in public policy, which he has studied and written about for 20 years.

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