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Another Voice / Local government

Gaughan's template doesn't fit Colden's circumstances

By Ronald Fraser

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Kevin Gaughan wants towns and villages in Erie County to adopt a one-size-fits-all government reform formula — reduce governing boards by two seats. In the Town of Colden, however, this remedy does not make a lot of sense.

First, not all elected officials are politicians and legislators. Of the nine elected Colden officials identified by Gaughan, only the five Town Council members are, in my view, politicians and legislators. The other four — two town justices, the town clerk and the town highway superintendent — are, by any meaningful measure, town employees who happen to be elected rather than appointed or hired. From this perspective, Colden has 44 percent fewer “politicians” than Gaughan says it has.

Second, reducing Colden's governing board to three members from five might save a few dollars, but there is a big nonmonetary cost. A five-person council brings a greater variety of viewpoints and expertise to the table than a three-person body. A smaller board might make faster, but not necessarily better, decisions.

In addition, the ratio of citizens to council members has been going up for decades, not the other way, as Gaughan suggests. While Colden's population continued to grow from 2,899 in 1990 to 3,323 in 2000, the number of elected town councilmen has stayed at five for as long as anyone can remember.

Third, is the status-quo really unsustainable? Using New York State comptroller data, between 1998 and 2005 Colden's annual current operations budget (personnel, benefits and contracts) went from \$999,141 to \$1,151,034. This translates into a stable, per-capita expenditure over the seven-year period from \$344 to \$346. No out-of- control spending here.

There is another way to determine if the taxpayers in Colden are spending too much and getting too little for their money. Parkinson's Law states that a government bureau will constantly grow in size regardless of whether



the amount of work it does increases, stays the same or drops. Why? Since the status of each government boss goes up with the size of his or her staff, there is a built-in incentive for public managers to hire additional staffers even if the workload is unchanged.

Is Colden in the grip of Parkinson's Law? Gaughan counted 11 people on the public payroll in Colden, the nine listed above, and one clerk serving the justices and one secretary. According to old-timers, the town has made-do with about 11 employees since the 1980s. No out-of-control bureaucracy here.

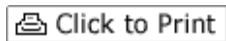
Ditto for the Buffalo metro area. The Buffalo Business First newspaper reported recently that local government employment in the metro area in December 2007 was 63,000, down 1,300 from a year earlier.

I applaud Gaughan for helping the citizens of Erie County think more seriously about how well we are being governed. His study, however, is not an end but rather a place to begin.

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