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## Gaughan wants all 16 villages in Erie County to merge with towns

*Says they should be absorbed by towns*

By **Barbara O'Brien - News Staff Reporter**  
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Kevin Gaughan, the regionalism guru turned merger maven, got applause and a standing ovation from a luncheon crowd after proposing that all 16 villages in Erie County merge into their towns.

“Local government isn’t broken in Erie County, it’s obsolete,” Gaughan told more than 250 attending a Buffalo Civic Day lunch, sponsored by the Rotary Club of Buffalo, Amherst Chamber of Commerce, Buffalo Chapter of the NAACP, Working for Downtown, VOICE-Buffalo, Buffalo Rising, New Millennium Group and Kenmore Rotary.

Gaughan was reporting on the state of local government, after his visits to the governing boards of the county’s 25 towns, 16 villages, three cities and County Legislature. It took him eight months and 2,135 miles to visit the municipalities and community groups with his message that Erie County is in crisis, and government needs to shrink for the area to survive.

During his tour, he urged government boards to cut their membership by two. But he has concluded that all the villages should dissolve. The villages have 9 percent of the county’s population, yet account for 23 percent of the county’s 439 elected politicians, he said.

“How could you argue with it?” said Cindy Pearson of Eden, after Gaughan’s speech.

Her friend Linda Adams, of Kenmore, said she was surprised by his statistics.

“If they’re accurate, it’s really amazing. Something has to be done and that looks like a good direction to take,” she said.

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It costs villages \$5.6 million each year to sustain their politicians, while villages receive \$7 million in sales tax, said Gaughan, who received a letter this week from Gov. David A. Paterson offering to meet with him on government reform.

Several politicians attended the luncheon, including Erie County Clerk Kathy Hochul, Erie County Legislator Thomas A. Loughran, D-Amherst, who has proposed shrinking the County Legislature from 15 members to nine, and North Collins Mayor John G. Mrozek Jr.

Mrozek is Exhibit A for Gaughan. The Village of North Collins has started discussions with the Town of North Collins on dissolving the village.

“I can’t speak for other villages,” Mrozek said. “I certainly know where we stand as a village, that in talking about this over the past few months, I have yet to hear anyone say they were opposed. I think it’s growing in support.”

Mrozek said he believes residents want to hear of concrete results of a merger, such as their taxes going down. The two boards will discuss what types of committees will be formed to address how to deal with services such as police protection and refuse pick-up, he said.

Hamburg Mayor Thomas Moses, reached by telephone, said dissolving a tiny village like North Collins is different than wholesale downsizing of all villages, particularly larger ones like Hamburg, which has more than 10,000 residents.

“Villages are probably the closest to the people. Why start on this scale here, when you’ve got bigger parts of the government that should be downsized first?” Moses said.

He suggested looking at county government for downsizing. Moses said the Town of Hamburg has taken over some village services, such as assessing and building inspection. But if people vote to dissolve the village, he would follow their wishes.

“If the people want it that way, fine,” Moses said, adding, “I don’t feel people are coming out and screaming about it.”

Donna Gonser of Hamburg noticed that while many people agree with Gaughan’s observations, things don’t seem to change.

“He gets standing ovations, yet elected officials don’t seem to agree. I just find it’s amazing there’s that disconnect,” said Gonser, who is on the board of Working for Downtown.


Orchard Park Mayor John Wilson said he has not seen any plan by Gaughan describing how his goals could be achieved.

“He has no bridge between the reality of today, and the dream he has,” Wilson said.

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