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Another voice / Regionalism

Goal of government efficiency can't be a one-man show

By Richard L. Taczowski

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As Erie County Executive Joel Giambra steps down from his regional bully pulpit, Buffalo News columnist Donn Esmonde appears to be reanointing Kevin Gaughan as champion of the local government right-sizing cause. The latter's poetic eloquence and organizational efforts have rightly kept him and this issue in the public eye.

But despite Gaughan's many talents, it would be a mistake to prop up another prophet to proclaim from on high the virtues of collaboration and consolidation. This top-down, personality-driven approach hasn't worked in the decade since the Chautauqua Conference, on whose steering committee I served. It is time to start listening to and working with the voices "on the ground."

In his latest foray, Gaughan has set his sights on governing boards to the exclusion of, among other entities, town and village courts and their facilities, which are being considered for consolidation in at least 10 other New York counties, according to the Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness, headed by former Lt. Gov. Stan Lundine.

As one who called for reducing the size of North Collins' village and town boards while serving on them more than eight years ago, I find nothing new in Gaughan's current crusade.

In 1999, along with proposing to reduce our Town Board to three members, I recommended making the town clerk and highway superintendent appointed public officers (not a measure I would advocate today). Although reported in The Buffalo News, not one of our governmental-efficiency wonks lent his prestige to either of those streamlining proposals.

A few years ago, when Angola community activist Paul Pinto was struggling to place a referendum on the ballot allowing ordinary Angolans to decide whether they wanted their village to dissolve, where were the pro bono



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fiscal and legal analyses by those claiming to lead the regionalism movement?

This region cannot move the most sensible aspects of regionalism forward if the only ideas come from one or two microphones or pens. We need grassroots efforts and state carrots, more than a one-man traveling slide show admonishing citizen-legislators to give up their power. We ought to turn our attention to the success stories occurring throughout our region and state.

Also needed is an institution, whether at the University at Buffalo, the county or a regional planning board, to provide affordable and impartial technical assistance and analysis, not only to local councils with limited means, but to committed citizens who have banded together to change their communities.

Hopefully, the Lundine Commission will recommend legislation that would make it easier for citizens' groups to obtain this professional assistance, as well as the ability to directly propose ballot initiatives that could alter or abolish outmoded governance structures.

Richard L. Taczkowski is a public policyanalyst and urban and regional planner.

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