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Governing here costs \$32 million

Report shows area with 439 officials

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Erie County supports an ever-present strata of 439 elected leaders, more than similar-sized regions of the country and even more than New York City, where 8.1 million people get by with about 270 elected officials.

A new study finds that those 439 politicians and their immediate staffs consume \$32.1 million a year in salaries and benefits - or more than \$250 million since 1996. With just half of that amount, Erie County could have dismantled the Skyway, saved every library, repaired the fountain at Martin Luther King Jr. Park and hired 200 more Buffalo teachers.

"We are sick and tired of nothing happening in Western New York," said Kevin P. Gaughan, the regionalism advocate and occasional political candidate whose report, "Paying Our Politicians," asks whether all those elected leaders impede the region's ability to improve itself.

"At the end of the day, beyond the money, what these politicians are costing us is time," he said. "Time that we will never recover. The time during which projects are not completed, land lies fallow, and citizens lose hope. So what this system really costs us is hope."

By the "system," he means the municipal boundaries that exist because they made sense decades or centuries ago and the political organizations that lay claim to those governments and protect them as part of their power base.

Erie County leaders for years have talked about government mergers or consolidation, but they have engineered only a few small successes. Had all gone according to plan, county residents would be voting Nov. 7 on whether to turn county government into the new "Regional City of Buffalo." But that idea to merge the county's two largest governments died when County Executive Joel A. Giambra's career hit the rocks with the budget fiasco of 2004-05. He lost the political clout to push the proposal, and no one in City Hall took up the cause.

Gaughan, who backed that effort and has organized community discussions about regionalism, expressed concern that entrenched politicians generally protect the status quo.

"Perhaps we were looking at it all wrong," he said Tuesday. "If you want to reduce the size of government, perhaps you have to reduce the number of politicians."

His report tells people how much their elected leaders cost them - an average of \$35 a year for every man, woman and child in Erie County. That \$35 covers just the pay and benefits for the politicians and their immediate help. Remember, he said, nine of every 10 elected officials in Erie County are, in theory, part-time workers.

Gaughan will explain the report at 6 p.m. today in Hallwalls at the Church at 341 Delaware Ave. He also set up a Web site - www.TheCost.org - so residents can see what they spend for their elected officials and the politicians above them.

Greater Buffalo has more governments and more elected officials than Greater Indianapolis, Greater Charlotte, Greater Baltimore and New York City, the report says. Also unlike the others, Greater Buffalo lost population since 1970, and it has the lowest birth rate.

Government employment overall, not just among elected leaders, generally fares well in Western New York. An Albany think tank recently found that Buffalo and the rest of upstate New York have added public-sector jobs this decade far faster than the private sector has been able to add jobs.

Erie County's suburbs, not Buffalo, contain the most politicians per resident. To mirror the suburbs' ratio of representation, Buffalo's Common Council would have to grow from nine members to 100. To mirror the tiny town of Marilla, population 5,600, the Council would need

to be 247 strong.

But don't all governments, no matter how small, need their elected leaders?

"For him to make these kind of statements, I don't agree with it because I don't think everything is being considered," said Marilla Supervisor John R. Foss. He said the town is financially fit and can provide services better than larger entities.

"You are representing a geographic area, not just a population," Foss said. "If we closed the Highway Department and tried to have the county do it, we'd be a mess. When we had a storm last week, the Town of Marilla was the first town plowed out."

Gaughan used a grant from the Oishei Foundation and the legwork of students from the University at Buffalo Law School to complete the report. His office at the law firm Rupp, Baase, Pfalzgraf, Cunningham & Coppola became a repository for municipal budgets, nearly all of which account for their elected leaders differently.

Those 439 elected leaders for Erie County include state legislators and members of Congress. When legislative and congressional districts extended outside Erie County, the researchers calculated just the cost of the district's portion within Erie County.

Gaughan's report becomes public less than two weeks before Election Day. Bloggers and their readers were buzzing about it Tuesday, with reminders that Gaughan, after all, has campaigned for office, once for Congress and last year for Buffalo mayor.

"The idea is a good one, but I can see where this is going," said a contributor to www.buffalorising.com. "He'll propose some sort of downsizing, and put people out of work. When you place ideas ahead of people, it is a dangerous and selfish notion."

Later there was this: "One of the great mysteries in Buffalo continues to be most citizens' reluctance to change. . . . When an individual or group of individuals try to be a catalyst for change, they are often met with resistance not only from the entrenched political fraternity, but the majority of the citizenry."

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