

THE BUFFALO NEWS

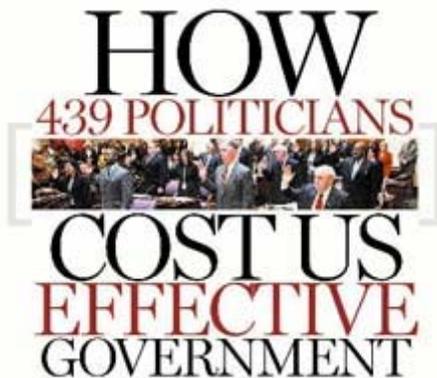
Opinion

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HOW 439 POLITICIANS COST US EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT

And why paying them \$32 million a year costs us our future

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The last straw came when we learned that Erie County had lost 30 percent of its young people.

A recent U.S. Census Bureau report showed that in the past decade, the number of 25- to 34-year-old residents leaving Western New York was the highest of any area in the nation. Anyone reading the survey knew that these young adults left not out of desire but out of necessity. In a region with more factory layoffs than company start-ups, they had no choice.

This latest proof of our failed local economy came this past spring in the bleak context of what we already knew. Since 1990, on average, one person moves out of Western New York every one hour and forty minutes. Local per capita income levels and housing stock values are down. Twenty thousand private-sector jobs have vanished. The only census category that's risen in our recent past is the number of free school lunches, a measure of impoverishment.

And the final indignity? With politicians' refusal to accept reform, Buffalo and Erie County became America's first city and region with not one but two outside control boards. Local government has lost its ability to collectively provide that which individuals cannot provide

Buffalo News file photo

If the City of Buffalo had the same ratio of citizens to legislators as the suburbs do, there would be 100 or more Common Council members crowding the City Hall chambers.

| | New York City | Greater Baltimore | Greater Charlotte | Erie County |
|-----------------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Governments | 1 | 3 | 8 | 45 |
| Politicians | 64 | 33 | 60 | 341 |
| Judges | 184 | 62 | 75 | 98 |
| Elected Officials | 248 | 95 | 135 | 439 |
| Population (2003) | 8,135,135 | 1,670,119 | 752,366 | 941,293 |
| Pop. Change Since '90 | +792,571 | +54,643 | +240,933 | -97,209 |

Source: www.TheList.org

On the cover: The Erie County Legislature, shown being sworn in Jan. 5, was decreased from 17 to 15 members in 2004.
Cover photo by Dennis C. Eason/ Buffalo News

for themselves. Public libraries, beaches, parks and pools - all closed for lack of resources - eroded both our sense of community and sense of self. And as new ideas died, public projects languished and waterfront land lay fallow, citizens all but concluded that we'll never change.

But change must become our new status quo. And local government downsizing should lead the way - not only to save money but also to restore decisive leadership.

Because all our recent setbacks took place against the backdrop of three economic resurgences that have swept America since 1990, ever lifting the stock market to more record highs but never touching the lives of local citizens.

During this same period, it was generally agreed that the size and cost of local government impair economic growth in the Buffalo region; that the burden of an expensive, overlapping system, worsened by state government dysfunction, robs our future. So citizens launched an effort to make local government more efficient and fair. But by the time we learned about the accelerating loss of young citizens last spring, that effort had failed.

Reading about the youth exodus, I asked two questions: Why did the movement to reform local government die? And what could I do to breathe new life into it?

The challenge of change

Reform efforts failed because creating consensus for change in our community is next to impossible. Sisyphus had a better chance of pushing his rock to the top of the hill than we have of changing the way we govern ourselves. And the chief reason for that difficulty is our inordinately large number of politicians.

Including village, town, city, county, state and federal government levels, Erie County has 439 elected politicians (including 98 judges). That's more than the 435 elected officials who represent the entire nation in the U.S. House of Representatives. At last count, the U.S. population was over 300 million, and Erie County's was 941,293.

The two-county region known as Greater Baltimore, population 1,670,119, has 33 local

elected politicians. Erie County has 341. When you add in local judges, state and federal officials, Greater Baltimore has 95 elected officials, compared to our 439. (See the accompanying chart.)

Charlotte, N.C., the destination for many Western New York "ex-pats," has 752,366 residents and 60 elected politicians. Both Charlotte and Baltimore enjoyed substantial growth in the past decade. And New York City, with its over 8 million citizens, broad diversity and complex social challenges, gets by with just 64 elected politicians.

Lost in the noise of 439 public servants' voices is any clear sense of direction for our community. In a system where seemingly everyone stakes claim to power, no one is in charge. Not one of these 439 individuals can negotiate aggressively on our behalf in Albany or Washington. And when you factor in their 439 individual views, powers and purposes, it's easy to see why decisive, accountable leadership has eluded us.

The cost of this political class, expressed in lost opportunities for development and change, is immeasurable. But the path to future change begins with an understanding of the present price of our current system.

The cost

To reach that understanding, I assembled a team of student researchers from the University at Buffalo Law School and set out to determine the cost to citizens of sustaining 439 elected officials. The goal of our study was to give taxpayers information they've never had before: the annual aggregate cost of salary, health care and pension benefits for our 439 elected politicians and their immediate staff.

Separate and apart from the expense of government services - i.e., public safety, law enforcement, education, human services, transportation and culture - our report discloses how much we spend on politicians. In so doing, it questions whether the cost of 439 elected officials impairs our ability to finance public projects and essential services. And whether funds used to pay politicians would be better spent on government employees who actually provide those services.

Over a five-month period, we visited each of the 25 town halls, 16 village halls, three city halls and one county hall throughout Erie County, reviewed their annual budgets and official minutes, filed 23 Freedom of Information Act requests, and interviewed scores of public officials and employees. We found that:

- The total annual cost to Erie County taxpayers for 439 politicians is \$32,140,386.
- In the past decade, we paid our elected officials and their immediate staffs over a quarter of a billion dollars - a brutal bill for their presiding over this period of decline.
- Erie County has as many as 10 times the number of politicians as comparably sized regions in America.
- By reallocating just one-half of what we spent on elected officials in the past decade, we could have: dismantled the Skyway; reopened public beaches; saved libraries; hired 100 more

Buffalo school teachers; repaired the Martin Luther King Park fountain; and cleaned the Black Rock Channel.

- Our excessive cost of politicians derives from the system as a whole, not from any individual jurisdiction or salary.
- The concentration of politicians is highest in the suburbs. If the City of Buffalo had the same ratio of citizens to legislators as its suburbs, there would be 100 Common Council members.
- In suburban towns and villages, the ratio of citizens to legislators is unnecessary and unsustainable.

How we got here

How did Western New York become knee-deep in local government? The answer is found at the inception of our nation. After creating a republic of states under the protection of a federal system, the founding fathers conducted a lengthy debate about self-government on the local level. Their experiment in democracy couldn't succeed without communities organizing themselves to discharge local duties.

Eighteenth century governance experts recommended choosing one of two systems. A state could designate cities as its local incorporated entity, to receive state and federal funds and be responsible for service delivery. Or it could have counties do the job. Most New England states chose the city system, and many Southern states chose counties.

Unable to make up its mind, New York State chose both systems, thereby setting in motion a history of cities and counties joining incorporated towns and villages to create the multilayered labyrinth in which we find ourselves today.

But why, in this age of population loss, do we accept so many public servants, all trying to hold still while the ground shifts violently from the rumble of so many of their private masters moving elsewhere? In interviews with several suburban legislators, I found that beyond overseeing local budgets, they spend considerable time on constituent service - from road repair requests to parks improvement.

That is, town and village politicians have permitted urban government practices to seep into the suburban experience: requiring constituents who need assistance to call them rather than, say, the town highway department or village parks director. As a result, it's difficult for these suburban servants to envision their government operating effectively without their involvement. But they are wrong.

Our report found that, like New York, most states have bucolic suburban towns and lovely villages. But unlike us, their towns and villages are not incorporated municipalities with an accompanying gaggle of politicians. For example, Greater Baltimore, a region that includes two counties with a total population of 1.6 million, has only three local governments. Compare that with Erie County's 45 local governments.

Because we've become accustomed to this system and derive much of our identity from our city, town or village, abolishing or merging them is unlikely. But perhaps we can achieve lower

costs and increased efficiency through another means.

Reduce by a deuce

Our study revealed that the highest concentration of politicians is found in suburban towns and villages. Comparing the number of council members, supervisors, trustees and mayors with their respective town and village populations, we found that the average ratio of citizens to legislators in the suburbs was 2,711 to 1. If the City of Buffalo, with its 269,000 residents had the same citizen/legislator ratio, there would be 100 members of the Buffalo Common Council.

For example, the Town of Concord, with its population of 8,526, has 10 elected officials, five of whom are legislators. To achieve the same citizen/legislator ratio, Buffalo would require 164 Common Council members.

The Village of Lancaster enjoys a population of 11,490. It has eight elected officials, seven of whom are legislators. If Buffalo equaled that level of politician-to-resident service, the Common Council would have 170 members.

In recent years, both Buffalo and Erie County downsized their legislative bodies. This past November, Town of Tonawanda voters approved a measure to reduce its town council from seven to five members. I propose that, through attrition, each of the remaining 24 towns and 16 villages do the same. If every suburb reduced its legislature by two members, we would eliminate 80 elected officials, more closely align our system with comparably sized regions, and reap substantial savings.

In the coming weeks, with the assistance of our student researchers, I intend to present our report to every suburban government, and challenge them to cut their number of politicians by two by not filling the seats of the next two legislators who retire.

The reform imperative

The inability to change is an illness afflicting the Western New York body politic. As such, every private citizen and public servant shares a responsibility to cure it.

If there ever existed a people who deserve the best local government possible, it's Western New Yorkers. With endless challenges over which we exercise no control - climate and geographic location among them - we should insist on affecting that which we can, producing a government structure that meets its first obligation of serving people.

I came of age in a time when citizens changed America. From spiritual leaders of the 1960s who stopped discrimination, to young mothers of the 1970s who halted an unjust Vietnam War, citizens shaped our nation and its future. And if any of those community leaders were here today, surveying the landscape of life in Western New York in 2006, this would be their struggle: demanding reform of a political system that has lost its direction and purpose.

For more than money, our politicians have cost us time. Time we can never recover. And the hope that always seems to slip away with time is a loss that cannot be measured in dollars and cents.

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