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Local governments grudgingly hear Gaughan's downsizing credo

In visits to localities, an issue is how much time should be given

By **Sandra Tan - News Staff Reporter**

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Regionalism advocate Kevin P. Gaughan's latest crusade invokes images of a medieval peddler pulling a cart of big ideas from village to village, town to town. Villagers are often eager to buy, but their leaders are more likely to be standing at the gates with a stone in each hand.

So it has been for Gaughan, who has visited four towns and two villages since November, part of a speaking tour across Western New York to persuade elected leaders to downsize their own numbers.

Tonight's presentation before the Amherst Town Board is no exception.

Council members spent nearly 15 minutes at a work session last week trying to get Gaughan uninvited to tonight's regular meeting, citing time constraints and the fact that Gaughan is not a town resident.

When Gaughan prepared to make his pitch before the Village Officials Association of Erie County last week, he recalled, "It was a little colder inside than it was outside."

Given that the meeting was held in a Hamburg restaurant and no journalists happened to be present, some might have found it impressive that Gaughan was willing to speak before so many elected officials holding knives.

"The conversation was extremely raw," Gaughan acknowledged.

Two months into his campaign to get town and village boards to cut their own numbers by two through attrition, Gaughan already has weathered some big obstacles — and a few successes.

"No one — no citizen, no public servant — can defend the path that our community is on," Gaughan said in



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touting his yearlong study into government services with the help of law students from the University at Buffalo.

Despite some closed-door grumbling after Gaughan's presentation before the Lancaster Village Board in November, trustees there agreed to take the first step toward cutting the board's numbers by abolishing the ward system. But while most other boards have given Gaughan a polite reception, they haven't shown signs of embracing his goals, saying that Gaughan offers a simplistic solution to a complex problem.

"I wish Gaughan would just go," said Orchard Park Village Mayor John Wilson, when asked when the Village board might invite Gaughan to speak.

Two town boards — Cheektowaga and Amherst — have taken a more aggressive approach to dealing with the eager advocate. They reorganized their agendas and left Gaughan's presentation for last, undercutting his ability to draw an audience.

When Gaughan tried to speak before the Cheektowaga board last month, large numbers of people turned out to hear him. But it was hours before Gaughan finally took the floor.

A few angry residents periodically interrupted the board with outbursts of, "Let Kevin Gaughan speak!" but half the people had left by the time Gaughan made his pitch.

In Amherst, Council Member Guy R. Marlette said Gaughan's presentation would interfere with the board's ability to complete the business of the town.

Council Member Mark A. Manna said, "I don't see how adding somebody who is a nonresident, who is just voicing his opinion, is considered the agenda of the people."

Supervisor Satish B. Mohan pleaded with his colleagues to give Gaughan 10 minutes, saying that last year's board already had agreed to allow him to speak and that rescinding the offer would be "unbecoming" of the board.

Council Member Barry A. Weinstein said he had no objection to Gaughan's presentation. But he and Mohan appeared to be the only ones who didn't.

Several council members pointed to a public hearing scheduled for a controversial Walgreen drugstore project and a pending rezoning proposal for a major Benderson development.

But when council members learned that both items had been postponed and removed from tonight's agenda, their opinions about Gaughan's presentation didn't change. They offered to have him appear at a work session but were irritated that Gaughan wanted time carved out of their regular meeting.

"He wants to be on TV," Manna said, referring to Time Warner's cable telecast of regular meetings, but not work sessions. "Let's be honest here: Why should we indulge him in this? We're here for Amherst taxpayers, not for free TV time for anybody."

Council Member Deborah Bruch Bucki said Gaughan's presentation tonight should be limited to three minutes, the same amount of time extended to any resident who wishes to speak at the meeting.

The board ultimately decided that Gaughan could have 10 minutes to speak at the end of tonight's agenda. Given that Amherst meetings tend to run long, Gaughan is unlikely to take the floor before 10 or 11 p.m., even though the meeting starts at 7.

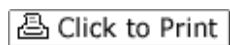
Gaughan said he regrets the board's decision.

"It's very challenging to get public officials to not view this in a personal way," he said, "either in respect to them, or in respect to me."

stan@buffnews.com

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