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Loughran floats plan to cut 6 seats from County Legislature

Proposal to redraw district boundaries faces an uncertain future

By **Matthew Spina** NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Updated: 07/01/08 7:50 AM

An Erie County lawmaker Monday formally proposed shrinking the County Legislature from 15 members to nine — an idea that would go to voters in November 2009 if the Legislature allows it.

The move by Legislator Thomas A. Loughran, D-Amherst, is among the most dramatic responses yet to the study by civic activist Kevin Gaughan, who in 2006 revealed that redundant layers of government have given Erie County 439 elected officials. With their immediate staffs, they cost \$32 million a year.

Gaughan has been visiting legislative bodies in every city, town and village in Erie County to explain his findings and implore its officials to shed elected offices through attrition.

Gaughan did not ask the County Legislature to shrink because it had done so in recent years, from as many as 20 in the 1970s to the current 15. He only asked that county legislators approve a statement supporting local government efforts to downsize.

But Loughran was struck by the argument that since Erie County has lost 238,000 people since 1970, triggering the closing or merging of churches, synagogues, hospitals and libraries, shouldn't the Legislature reduce, too?

Several counties around the nation, as big or bigger than Erie's population of 920,000, make do with fewer than 15 legislators, he says.

For examples, a 10-member board of supervisors oversees the government for Fairfax County, Va., which contains more than 1 million people. A seven-member county commission represents the nearly 1 million people in Fulton County, Ga.



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“Almost to a person I have talked to, no one is arguing against reducing the size of government,” Loughran said. “The private sector, the hospitals, the parks — it’s the government’s turn to downsize.”

At this point, with only one sponsor, the prospects for passage are uncertain. Loughran is not a voting member of the committee likely to receive his resolution, the Government Affairs Committee. A voting member, Democrat Robert B. Reynolds of Hamburg, threw the most arguments at Gaughan when he appeared before the panel in April.

Majority Leader Maria R. Whyte, D-Buffalo, is a voting member and the committee’s vice chairwoman who led the panel last year.

“This is minimally worthy of a good solid debate,” she said of Loughran’s proposal. “I think there was a lot of wisdom in the presentation made by Kevin Gaughan. But I also think that Kevin’s point was that the Legislature had already downsized somewhat. So I can see the pros and cons of the County Legislature downsizing. Nevertheless, I had said at the time, and remain, very open-minded.”

Loughran’s plan, which he drafted with Gaughan, calls on the Legislature to create by Jan. 1 a nine-member “citizens commission on reapportionment” that would draw nine legislative districts and drive the community discussion.

The Legislature would appoint four commission members, the county executive three and the county comptroller, selected because he is elected countywide, two.

The commission would unveil the boundaries of the nine new districts well before Nov. 3, 2009, when voters would choose whether to accept them. Meanwhile, the current 15 lawmakers will be up for re-election.

If voters approve the referendum, the 15 legislators elected in 2009 would serve for one more term — two years — before the nine districts go into effect for the 2011 election.

Not everyone is convinced reducing the size of the Legislature is a step forward. Gregory B. Olma, a former county legislator, said smaller districts mean that legislators are more in touch with their residents.

“When there were 17 districts, they were big but they were walkable,” he said. “You could walk one and knock on all the voters’ doors in two years. You could do a decent job of outreach. The downside of nine members means enormous districts. It’s way too big. It would be even more difficult than now for a challenger to take on an incumbent in a district of that size.”

Gaughan’s study, which he calls “The Cost,” has gained traction elsewhere. The Village of Lancaster has decided to eliminate two politicians and put that to voters, as the Village of Depew did successfully last year. The Village of North Collins, population 1,033, went further by taking the first steps toward merging into the Town of North Collins, population 4,375.

Together, the town and village of North Collins create a lesson about excessive representation: With 10 elected officials for the town and village, there is an elected official for every 437 citizens. If the County Legislature followed that ratio, there would be 2,080 lawmakers.

Assuming County Legislature districts are exactly equal in size, each of the 15 legislators currently represents about 61,000 people for their \$42,588 a year plus health insurance.

With nine districts, each legislator would represent about 102,000 people.

Whenever legislative boundaries are redrawn, there are concerns about the representation of minorities, particularly Buffalo’s minorities. Six legislative districts currently take in some portion of Buffalo, or 40 percent

of the 15 districts. To keep that ration with nine districts, four would have to include Buffalo.

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