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Mayors defend their villages as 'essential' to residents

By Fred Williams

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Village mayors around Erie County today launched a rebuttal against a call for dissolution of villages.

Village governments play an essential role in the lives of residents — and are not the cause of local government bloat, the mayors said a news conference.

"Representative government will never be obsolete," said John Wilson, president of the county Village Officials Association and mayor of the Village of Orchard Park.

Twelve of the county's 16 villages were represented at the event in Blasdell organized by the New York State Conference of Mayors and Municipal Officials.

Regionalism advocate Kevin Gaughan has proposed that Erie County's villages merge into their towns to save taxpayer money. Presenting a report in July, Gaughan said that villages, with 9 percent of the county's population, account for 23 percent of its elected officials.

The villages attending gave a resounding "no" to Gaughan's call for them to begin holding referendums on their continued existence.

"None of us has heard an outcry from our constituents to put this up for a referendum," Wilson said.

Some villages have been willing to entertain the idea.

North Collins officials have said they will take steps toward a referendum on whether to merge with the Town of North Collins, and mayor John Mrozek has said he favors the idea.

Alden residents held a vote, and decided to keep their village in 1996.

According to Gaughan's study, villages receive \$7 million a year in county sales tax, and spend \$5.6 million to sustain their politicians.

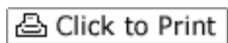
Advocates for villages counter that their low pay -- the jobs are part time -- makes them more efficient and accountable than larger governments.

At the same time, some village officials attending said they are consolidating services with surrounding towns where it makes sense.

Of five villages statewide that have looked at dissolution in the past two years, only one decided the savings would be worth the loss of local control, according to the conference of mayors.

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