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**Action awaits census results, but proposal would pare board to 11 legislators from current 19**

## Niagara County Legislature considering reduction in size

**By Thomas J. Prohaska - NEWS NIAGARA BUREAU**

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LOCKPORT — A resolution that would support — but not promise — the reduction of the size of the Niagara County Legislature was introduced Tuesday by three members of the majority caucus.

The resolution to cut the Legislature from 19 to 11 members was sponsored by Legislators John D. Ceretto, R-Lewiston; Danny W. Sklarski, D-Town of Niagara; and Gerald K. Farnham, R-Lockport. It is to appear on the Sept. 2 agenda. Ceretto said it would undoubtedly be referred to committee for discussion.

County Attorney Claude A. Joerg said it would have been illegal to take the step to shrink the Legislature before the results of the 2010 U. S. census are in, so the resolution makes no attempt to do that.

“That’s why I approved it,” said Joerg, whose job includes trying to make sure the Legislature doesn’t pass anything illegal. “The only way they can actually do it is a local law with redistricting.”

And since state law says district boundaries can be redrawn only once a decade, the Legislature will have to wait until the census numbers come out in early 2011.

That means the Legislature could always renege on the commitment, but Ceretto said, “My intention is to commit us to it.”

Farnham did not return a call seeking comment, but Sklarski predicted the resolution would pass unanimously. “Actually, that was one of my platforms when I first got elected,” he said. “I’ve been consistent in saying the size needs to be reduced.”

As for the new number of lawmakers, Sklarski said 11 is not “set in stone.”



Minority Leader Dennis F. Virtuoso, D-Niagara Falls, said, “I don’t have a problem reducing the size of the Legislature. Maybe we should let the voters decide after the next census and put it up for a referendum.”

But Joerg said state law allows the Legislature to set a new size without taking its case to the voters, although if the voters are dissatisfied, they have the right to force a referendum by signing a sufficient number of petitions.

Virtuoso said, “As to what size, maybe we should wait until the census figures are in and see where the shifts are. Some towns are going to lose representation. Some cities are going to lose representation.”

In 2001, voters defeated a proposed new county charter that included a cut in the number of legislators from 19 to 15, but also gave the survivors four-year terms instead of the current two years. The charter also included the creation of an elected county executive, which was regarded as the primary reason for its defeat.

Asked if he backs longer terms, Ceretto said, “Right now that’s not in my mind. If that’s going to stop this from going forward, I’m against four-year terms.”

Cost savings would be relatively minor. Rank-and-file legislators are paid \$15,075 a year, a figure that hasn’t changed since 2000. The two party leaders are paid an extra \$500 and the chairman receives an extra \$3,000.

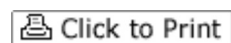
Dropping eight regular legislators would save \$120,600 in salaries. Nine of the 19 current legislators take county-paid health insurance, the premiums for which this year total \$80,020. If eight of them left, the total savings from shrinking the Legislature would be less than \$200,000.

“When you’ve got a \$300 million budget, it’s really not a big thing, but it shows we’re interested in downsizing government,” Sklarski said.

[tprohaska@buffnews.com](mailto:tprohaska@buffnews.com)

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