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Officials of 12 Erie County villages reject Gaughan's call for governments to dissolve

Gaughan plans further talks with village representatives

By Fred O. Williams NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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Stung by Kevin Gaughan's call to dissolve their governments, officials of villages around Erie County issued a vehement "no" to the idea Wednesday.

Villages "are the most direct form of government, the most responsive," said Terry L. Caber, mayor of the Village of Farnham in the Town of Brant.

Led by low-paid, part-time officials who see their constituents regularly, villages are the last place to look for government bloat, officials argued.

Representatives from 12 of the county's 16 villages took part in the news conference at Blasdell Village Hall.

Gaughan, a regionalism advocate, said in an interview he is organizing a meeting with village officials on Sept. 9 to discuss the dissolution idea further.

He is also helping residents of villages petition for referendums to dissolve their villages, he said, bypassing entrenched officials.

"No drop of water thinks it's responsible for the flood," he said of elected officials.

If a village government refuses to hold a referendum, residents can force a vote by collecting signatures from one-third of registered voters.

Wednesday's meeting in Blasdell, organized by the New York State Conference of Mayors and Municipal Officials, came in response to Gaughan's call to dissolve the county's villages by 2012 to reduce bloated local government.

According to his study, villages are home to 9 percent of the county's residents and account for 23 percent of its 439 elected officials.



During a tour of the county's 45 municipalities, Gaughan said, he sat in on meetings where village officials discussed things like buying a wheelbarrow.

"It's no longer necessary," he said.

Not all the county's villages are opposed to going out of business. The Village of North Collins is preparing to hold a referendum next spring on merging with the town, Mayor John Mrozek said. Working groups are studying how garbage pickup, police and other services would be continued.

"Most people are looking for a reduction in their taxes," he said, adding that the savings have yet to be estimated. "I think it's a small decrease, but it's a concrete step."

Around the state, villages were formed over the years to provide services that residents needed and weren't getting from their towns, said Peter A. Baynes, executive director of the State Conference of Mayors. Some have become obsolete, but most that look at merging decide that the savings of consolidation don't justify the loss of local control.

"Bigger government isn't always more efficient government," he said.

In Broome County, the Village of Windsor, near Binghamton, examined merging and found that the savings would amount to \$94 in property taxes per average resident, according to Baynes' group. Of five villages statewide that have studied mergers since 2006, only one went ahead with the idea, he said.

In 1996, Alden village residents petitioned for a referendum but ended up voting to keep the village government. Mayor Richard Kegler, who wasn't in office at the time, remembers the vote as being two-to-one against dissolution.

"It's a pretty hard thing to convince people — [village government] is the closest government they've got," he said.

The average salary of village mayors in Erie County is \$4,000, while trustees generally make \$2,800, according to John Wilson, president of the county Village Officials Association. Meanwhile, their duties on boards and committees absorb many hours of officials' time, they said.

"For most mayors, it's a full-time job," Angola Village Mayor Howard Frawley said. "We don't make a lot of money; we do it because we love our communities."

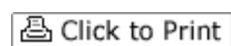
Gaughan said that those salaries do add up, plus health and retirement benefits for officials in some villages. His study found that pay for elected village officials cost \$5.6 million in 2006.

As for communities, it's possible to have a vibrant and cohesive community without a government in charge of things, he said, naming Snyder and Eggertsville in Amherst and Wanakah in Hamburg as examples.

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