



The Buffalo News : Opinion

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EDITORIALS

Revive consolidation

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Newspapers across New York State are concentrating attention on issues of mutual concern through a series of occasional “Upstate Focus” editorials, with each newspaper printing its independently reached opinion on a jointly selected topic on the same day. Today’s statewide topic is governmental consolidation. To see what other newspapers are saying, visit buffalonews.com or upstatefocus.com; to comment, visit the Matters of Opinion blog on buffalonews.com

There are 40 days left in this year’s political campaigns. But that’s not the number you want to remember.

That would be 439, the number of elected village, town, city, county, state and federal government officials and judges supported by Erie County. Or \$32 million, which is what it costs to support them.

Not all 439 officials are running for office this year. Far from it. But all of them ought to be thinking about the cost of government, the cost of duplicated or overlapping services, the need for so many balkanized jurisdictions and who gets helped — or hurt — when “turf” is blindly protected. And those who *are* running ought to be talking to you about it while it still can factor into your voting decisions. You need to know what they’re thinking, if you want any hope of easing the hurt.

Unfortunately, “regionalism” is a bad word here. It fell into disrepute with its champion, County Executive Joel A. Giambra, in Erie County’s unrelated green budget-red budget debacle. But Giambra’s push toward saving money through consolidations and cross-governmental officials was a good one, and demands revisiting. “Consolidation” is a good word. “Survival” is a more urgent one.

Erie County lost nearly a third of its young people during the last decade, posting the highest rate of decline for 25- to 34-year-olds in the nation. Buffalo’s tax base has been in decline for years, only now showing signs of revival. Schools are being pushed toward redistricting by population shifts and population loss. The economy remains nearly stagnant, taxes remain high and both the city and the county have

state-mandated financial control boards to impose fiscal constraints they couldn't find the political will to impose upon themselves. This region can't afford *not* to seek ways to deliver services more efficiently and more cheaply; the incredible shrinking city of today, and its environs, simply can't continue to pay for the incredible bloated political and governmental service structure of a more prosperous past.

Last year, a study of the size and cost of Erie County's local government — including 44 villages, towns and cities and 28 school districts — put a cost to that support: \$32,140,386 in salaries and benefits per year for the 439 elected politicians, more than a quarter of a billion dollars for elected officials and their staffs over the past decade. Researchers led by local lawyer and activist Kevin Gaughan also found that the county has as many as 10 times the number of politicians that other regions do — far more than the 64 elected officials in New York City or the 95 in Greater Baltimore, for example — and that many of our political jobs cluster in suburban towns and villages.

But beyond the jobs and salaries, there also are questions of scale: How many school districts (and their central administrations) do we really need? Is it necessary to keep politically separate villages that once were population concentrations in vast rural landscapes but now are only slightly more settled neighborhoods on the suburban scene? Wouldn't regional planning, rationally mapping out open spaces as well as residential and commercial clusters, make more sense than decisions more narrowly viewed by small jurisdictions?

There is nothing new in this. In 2004, the Public Policy Institute of New York State found that we pay 42 percent more for our many layers of government than other parts of the nation, and a two-year study led by former University at Buffalo president William B. Greiner in the 1990s urged consolidations. Now Gov. Eliot L. Spitzer has appointed a statewide Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness, headed by former Lt. Gov. Stan Lundine, to study this once more and plan a state push to move government structure from the 19th to the 21st century. You can weigh in at a daylong hearing Oct. 24 in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Erie County has submitted six consolidation initiatives, among the 26 cited by this eightcounty region, but only Allegany and Genesee counties are considering dissolving or merging governments (the full list is at www.nyslocalgov.org/local_initiatives_county.asp). Wholesale change is blocked not just by entrenched politicians but by residents who don't want to give up their own village police force, their own boards and councils, their own anything. That costs. There have been steps toward cost-saving — partnerships for waste disposal, city-county parks management consolidation, mergers of water systems — and small municipal consolidations helped by county and state funding. More needs to happen. It should be a campaign issue now, and a part of this community's conversation until this job gets done.

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A promotional banner for Kelly Clarkson's 'My December Tour'. On the left, there is a black and white portrait of Kelly Clarkson. To her right, the text 'KELLY CLARKSON' is written in large, bold, white capital letters, with 'My December Tour' in a smaller, white script font below it. Further right, the date and time 'OCTOBER 26 • 8 PM' are displayed in large white capital letters. Below this, it says 'LIVE IN THE SENECA EVENTS CENTER' in smaller white capital letters. The ticket prices 'TICKETS \$45 • \$55 • \$65' are listed in yellow capital letters. At the bottom of this section, it says 'CLICK HERE FOR TICKETS' in white capital letters. On the far right, the 'SENECA NIAGARA' logo is shown in white, with 'CASINO & HOTEL' in smaller white capital letters below it.

KELLY CLARKSON
My December Tour

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