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Halfway through downsizing tour, disappointment and hope

Selling Reform Door to Door

Kevin Gaughan is a local civic activist. Backed by his study that shows Erie County has more politicians than any like-sized community in America, he is visiting all 45 local governments and asking each one to eliminate two elected positions.

By Kevin Gaughan / SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

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The film clip from “It’s A Wonderful Life” had no sound. You could see Jimmy Stewart urging building and loan depositors not to panic during the bank run. But you couldn’t hear him say, “You’re thinking about this thing all wrong.”

It was the night before the first stop on my tour of Erie County’s 25 towns, 16 villages and three cities. The movie scenes that I included in the presentation — to add life to the details of our dying economy — couldn’t be heard. I wanted Stewart’s plea to depositors to underscore one of my central pleas to politicians: Those who think that if their town or village is OK, then our entire community must be all right, are thinking about local government all wrong.

Dan Gigante, a gifted technology expert, was feverishly punching computer keys, but no sounds emanated from the screen. A clear image entered my mind: me flop-sweating the next night in front of gleeful politicians.

“I’m going back to the office to memorize my speech,” I said. “Good idea,” Dan muttered back. But by morning, he had it solved. And I was on my way to try a new type of political speech — one that describes the economic death spiral gripping Western New York through not only charts and graphs, but also history, music, film and, I hoped, a bit of humor. Take the Village of Lancaster.

“God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen,” rang out from loudspeakers throughout the public square as we arrived at Village Hall on the final Monday night of November. “There’ll be no rest for politicians,” I boasted to my student assistants as we carried our gear from the car. “And there’ll be no gentlemanly treatment for you, Kev,” one of them replied. The thing about students is that they’re much smarter than you.



Lancaster is among the most lovely and bucolic villages in America. I remember walking in its Fourth of July parade along Central Avenue some years ago, on a sun-dappled American morning that would have made Norman Rockwell blush. What a magnificent place to raise a family.

And, thank heaven, several families turned out for the presentation. When I described Erie County's 439 politicians as being 10 times more than any comparable American community, the crowd gasped. For the first time, I thought that perhaps I was onto something.

But then the politicians had at me.

Hard and fast. Their responses paid little mind to the substance of my talk, but centered on how hard they worked and how little they were compensated. As they took turns objecting, I noticed the young mayor, Bill Cansdale, sitting quietly.

Based on that first effort, I knew my presentation had to be refined. Politicians were taking it personally, which meant I was failing to communicate that change is necessary not because they're bad, but rather because Western New York citizens are good. And they deserve a break from a government that burdens rather than boosts our economy. I changed my pitch, making it more collaborative than critical.

It made no difference before the Orchard Park Town Board. The moment I finished, they clawed back. One councilwoman argued that our region's woes stemmed from the collapse of local industry, poor decision making and the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway. All true. But irrelevant to the question my presentation poses: What should we do now?

I didn't argue with her, though, because I noticed an emerging pattern. When I finish my talk, perhaps 75 percent of the citizens in attendance favor downsizing. When the politicians finish their response, close to 100 percent support it.

The next morning I received an e-mail from Cansdale. He said that he supported my proposal to downsize through retirement, and that Lancaster would get it done. I called to thank him, and he graciously offered suggestions on further refining my talk. After putting down the phone, I closed my office door and let out a hoot that I'm sure was heard throughout downtown Buffalo. One down, 44 to go.

Like Lancaster, East Aurora is a historic American village with a unique sense of place. And like Lancaster, it has a seven-member board. Village boards in New York State were originally envisioned as having three members. In response to losing more than 220,000 residents and 35,000 jobs in recent years, our community is merging or closing hospitals, churches and libraries. Reducing the size of local boards is the least government can do.

After my speech, Mayor Dave DiPietro gave me a key to the village, which I hoisted above my head and kissed as if it were the Wimbledon trophy. He then spoke eloquently of the role each suburb plays in our larger community. DiPietro understands that while folks may live in East Aurora, they benefit from and partake in the Buffalo Bills in Orchard Park, Canal Fest in Tonawanda, galleries and museums in Buffalo, shops in the Elmwood Village and restaurants in Amherst.

Later, after all the citizens and politicians left, I sat alone in my car. In the snowy silence of a December night, I permitted myself the thought that maybe this little undertaking might work. Then I headed to Cheektowaga.

Local politicians are noble people. They share an innate interest in others, so they're great company, and my students enjoy them immensely. But they don't like change. And in Cheektowaga, I encountered a wily pol, then-Town Supervisor Jim Jankowiak, intent on sustaining the status quo.

Town and village chambers throughout Erie County share several traits. They are well-appointed, some

wood-paneled, and the politicians always sit on a raised platform. The design speaks the language of superiority, and violates Benjamin Franklin's assertion that the highest office in America is that of citizen. In all future designs of local government chambers, citizens should sit on a raised platform.

When I finished addressing the board, Jankowiak stepped down from his perch and came to stand next to me. As he upbraided my call for change, I stared at my shoe tops for a while, but then looked back at him. I couldn't help but notice that under his gray hair and stooped posture was a boyish face with bright, clear blue eyes. It was easy to picture him more than 30 years ago, starting out in government with energy and drive.

Of all the events that placed us on a path to too much government in Western New York, perhaps the most surprising was the 1970s collapse of the steel industry and closing of Bethlehem Steel. As thousands of young men hit the unemployment lines, desperate leaders used local government as a backstop. Men were given jobs in city parks and town highway departments. And government was on its way to becoming our region's largest employer.

So when you stop and consider folks like Jankowiak, who began his public career back then and spent a lifetime in public positions, you understand their fierce defense of a system that provided for them. And defend it Jankowiak did, until he was red in the face and I felt as blue as could be.

Long after everyone left, I sat alone in the chamber. Finally, Steve, the town custodian, told me it was time to lock up. Placing his arm on my shoulder as he walked me out, he said, "Man, politicians sure don't like you." Then — I'm sure just to lift my spirits — his face lit up as he added, "but people love you." A kind soul, that Steve.

My speech in Grand Island was horrible. I was just off. One thing I cannot brook is doing a poor job when people are kind enough to permit you to speak to them. If Grand Island decides to change its government based on my performance, it will probably add politicians.

At last, there was a holiday break. Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated. She was ahead of me at Harvard, but I knew her through her younger brother, Mir, a classmate and friend. She was a fiercely willed young woman; we called her Pinky, a family nickname. Even then, she was devoted to three things: her father, Pakistan and the idea of democracy. There are vitally important tasks to be done in American life, including repairing the damage done to our reputation in the world. I wonder why I ended up doing the work I do. And whether it's at all important.

My next stop was Amherst. The idea of standing directly in front of politicians and challenging them to change came to me late one night sitting in bed. My past educational conferences and citizen "conversations" gave rise to some reform. But to actually downsize government required a direct approach, done in the presence of citizens who can then assess and discuss the idea. And residents — hungry for change — are turning out in large numbers for these presentations.

But when I reached Amherst, the politicians placed my talk at the end of their multihour session in an effort to render it less accessible. Just as I arrived, though, they changed their mind and put it first on their agenda, affording me 10 minutes. With no time to edit my 20-minute talk, my only choice was to race through it as fast as I could. It was like an old Charlie Chaplin film, everything in fast motion. By the end even I was confused, so I can only imagine what the audience felt. The next morning, I was surprised when a board member called and asked to discuss the proposal further.

Lesson learned: I began to follow my public challenge to politicians with private conversations with them. These one-on-one talks have proven invaluable. I know that my downsizing proposal cannot succeed without the leadership of public officials. And they know that with the support of citizens, it cannot fail.

Williamsville is 1.3 square miles and has 5,315 residents. Its ratio of residents to politicians is 1,063 to 1. If the City of Buffalo had the same ratio, there would be 263 Common Council members. Buffalo has nine.

Twelve towns and 11 villages in Erie County have a population of less than 10,000. Under state law, these municipalities can and should have only three members on their town or village board. But all of them, including Williamsville, have five.

My presentation to the board was not well met. But a follow-up chat with a trustee was hopeful. We'll see.

Angola proved the lowest point so far. After dismissing my proposal out of hand, the village trustees began their meeting. Four topics were discussed: the cost of cleaning abandoned property in the village; the danger to children posed by broken glass on abandoned parcels; a local bank's decision to cut back hours of operation for lack of business; and a potential buyer's decision to back out of an investment in the village for lack of progress.

The irony of it all seemed lost on the public servants, but not on the public.

When I returned to the office that night, I heard that the Village of East Aurora trustees rejected a downsizing measure. Based on their reception back in December, I thought they were amenable to reform. Much work remains there.

My visit to the village trustees of Orchard Park took me back to the same chambers in which I addressed the town council of Orchard Park. There's a lesson in there somewhere.

The trustees' response was either defensive or silence. I thought of Winston Churchill's words, applied to leaders who ignore the dangers of standing still: "They go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant to drift, solid for fluidity, all powerful to be impotent."

Aurora's Town Hall, part of the magnificent 19th century Roycroft Campus, stands among the most beautiful public buildings in America. Its stone facade encases colonial-style meeting rooms. On a cold March night, local student D.J. Miller gave me a brief tour of the building, pointing out the portrait of Elbert Hubbard, founder of the Roycroft community, which hangs in council chambers. Walking the building, you feel not Hubbard's ghost, only his genius.

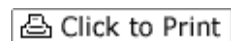
The best part of my presentation is the discussion that follows. They're sometimes raw, often intense, but always enlightening. And they are best when the politicians permit those citizens in attendance to participate.

In Alden, Supervisor Ron Smith's graciousness — extended from the moment we arrived as he helped us unload our cars — gave rise to a session from which everyone benefited. Other host politicians have been kind, but the tone Smith set for the meeting was authentic. As a result, residents discussed my proposal in a way that clarified its intent and purpose.

As I drove away, I realized that I was near the halfway point in my tour. I put the car windows down all the way. The night air now held a hint of spring, with all the sense of promise that the season evokes.

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