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Five legislators agree with Gaughan that 15 members are too many

Support grows for cutting six seats from Erie County Legislature

By Matthew Spina - News Staff Reporter

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Five Erie County lawmakers now are willing to downsize their Legislature. The three Republican members called a news conference Friday to say they back a recent suggestion to drop the Legislature from 15 lawmakers to nine, since it conforms with a proposal they made last year.

Meanwhile, Legislator Kathy Konst, D-Lancaster, said she favors downsizing to nine members or even fewer. Konst also has suggested doing so in the past.

Neither Konst nor the Legislature's three-member Republican minority had built a critical mass of support for their suggestions. This year, however, some momentum has begun.

Democrat Thomas A. Loughran of Amherst recently proposed shrinking the Legislature to nine members, meaning five lawmakers now favor doing so.

Those advocates still need to find three more like-minded lawmakers before the question can be put to a referendum in November 2009, when all 15 Legislature seats will be up for election.

The five lawmakers seem to agree with sentiments expressed by civic activist Kevin Gaughan, who has been leading a public drive to reduce the number of elected officials across Erie County.

Gaughan in 2006 publicized his study showing that redundant layers of government give Erie County 439 elected officials, who, with their support staffs, cost \$32 million a year. He asked whether a county losing population and private-sector jobs can afford all its politicians.

The three Republicans, a tiny minority in the Legislature, did not mention Gaughan in their joint statement Friday.



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Two of them, John J. Mills of Orchard Park and Michael H. Ranzenhofer of Amherst, mentioned that they called for a smaller Legislature as part of a reform plan in 2007.

The Legislature has downsized over the years, from 20 members to the current 15, a total reached in this decade. The Republicans argued that more money could be saved with fewer lawmakers and no district offices.

“The Legislature needs fewer and more qualified legislators,” said Ranzenhofer, a candidate for State Senate this year in the district being vacated by Williamsville’s Mary Lou Rath.

Her son, Edward A. Rath III, the County Legislature’s third Republican, took office in January.

“The reduction of the size of the Legislature must be undertaken in conjunction with the most current census data,” he said. “Otherwise, we will find ourselves operating under a weighted voting system, such as we were a few years back.”

Loughran’s plan, which he drafted with Gaughan, calls on the Legislature to create by Jan. 1 a nine-member “citizens commission on reapportionment” that would draw nine legislative districts and drive the community discussion leading to a referendum.

Then, if voters agree to a smaller Legislature, it would be reduced to nine for the first election in the next decade, in 2011.

A wrinkle has been found since Loughran unveiled his legislation. State law allows reapportionment only once in a decade. So after 2011 it won’t be possible to refine those nine legislative districts when the next decade’s census data arrives after that year.


Gaughan says he does not see a problem. The Census Bureau no longer releases data once a decade. It adjusts local population data constantly.

“We will know very closely what the decennial census is going to tell us,” Gaughan said. “The information upon which those districts will be drawn will be very close to the information that will be received later, with the decennial census.”

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