

Too many leaders cost too much

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By DONN ESMONDE

We cultivated and condoned them, and they multiplied like zebra mussels. If politicians brought prosperity and progress, we would all be making six figures and driving Corvettes. Just the opposite is true. We have more of them than most places, and less growth, less prosperity and higher taxes than anywhere. Maybe that is no coincidence.

Politicians are a multiplying breed who hike the cost of getting streets shoveled, sidewalks fixed and garbage picked up. We are barely half the size of metro Baltimore, yet have twice as many politicians. The political glut comes at a high price: \$32 million a year.

Civic leader Kevin Gaughan spent five months, helped by UB law students, figuring out the cost of 439 village, town, city, county, state and federal elected officials and their staffs www.TheCost.org.

The price of our political surplus goes beyond money.

We let politicians convince us that we need them, all of them, and we don't. Instead of calling the town's public works department to fix a sidewalk crack, we call our councilman. A politician. The politician then calls public works. They play the middleman. We pay the middleman.

"The structure is like the old Soviet system," Gaughan said on a recent morning over coffee, "where everything went through a government apparatchik."

The political glut costs us in leadership. Because politicians are everywhere, the buck stops nowhere. There is always somebody who doesn't want a new idea to fly. There is a standing political army guarding the status quo, ready to march against any reform.

The changes Amherst voters wanted Satish Mohan to make haven't happened - but not because Mohan lost his nerve. They haven't happened because an entrenched Town Board - backed by town workers who prop up their campaigns in return for job protection - stand in Mohan's way.

Yet we hold on to all of them - mostly in suburbia, where the ratio of politicians to people dwarfs the number in supposedly backward Buffalo. Folks in the village of Hamburg - population 9,637 - have four village trustees, four town council members and two executives. That is as many top-level politicians as there are for 290,000 Buffalonians.

Most small-town politicos work part time and don't make much. But it adds up, layer after layer. Village residents have a trustee, a mayor, a town council member, a town supervisor, a county legislator, a county executive, a state assemblyman, a state senator, a congressman and a U.S. senator. We each have enough political representatives to field a baseball team, yet we keep striking out.

We can change it. We can cut the size of our own government.

Gaughan and Joel Giambra for years pushed to consolidate - villages into towns, city into county. It largely went nowhere, killed mainly by the fear factor. Now Gaughan has a Plan B: Keep the structure, but cut the politicians in it.

"We caused this problem ourselves," said Gaughan, "and we can fix it and capture the savings."

Gaughan wants every suburban town and village to lose two lawmakers by attrition. But we don't have to wait for retirements, we can self-liposuction.

Buffalo's Council downsized from 13 to nine. The county legislature shrunk from 17 to 15. Tonawanda may slice two trustees. Public pressure prompted change. Every village and town owes its people a referendum, a chance to choose smaller government.

Our legion of politicians harms instead of helps us. They cost too much, they safeguard the status quo and they wallow in a buck-stops-nowhere mind-set.

Don't believe it? Look around.

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