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W. Seneca plans to cut board to 3 members

Supervisor likes Gaughan's ideas

By Samantha Maziarz Christmann NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Updated: 07/24/08 6:45 AM

One of Erie County's largest towns could have one of the smallest governing boards.

West Seneca Supervisor Wallace Piotrowski said Wednesday he will propose a resolution Monday to let voters decide whether the Town Board should be reduced from five members to three.

"This is of immense importance," said regionalism advocate Kevin Gaughan. "Wallace Piotrowski's leadership shifts the burden onto every other town and village in Erie County to justify paying for excessive government."

The move is the latest victory in Gaughan's push for the county's 45 municipalities to eliminate two elected positions each and dissolve all 16 villages into their surrounding towns.

The Village of Lancaster has decided to eliminate two politicians and put that to voters, as the Village of Depew did successfully last year. The Village of North Collins went further by taking the first steps toward merging into the Town of North Collins. And, so far, five legislators favor paring the County Legislature from 15 members to nine.

West Seneca is the largest town to move toward trimming board members. If approved, it will be the largest town in the county to be governed by three people.

"I was already looking for ways to reduce costs through sharing services and merging departments when Kevin came to speak to the board in May," Piotrowski said, referencing one of Gaughan's stops during an eight-month tour of county municipalities to propose governmental reform. "I was impressed by his ideas, and it fit perfectly with what I was doing."

By eliminating two salaries, benefits and retirement packages, he said, the town could save at least \$60,000 per year.

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In a letter to Gaughan, Piotrowski pointed to one selling point in Gaughan's argument as particularly convincing — New York State's original intent for all local governments to have three-member boards.

In accordance with that original plan, villages would have a mayor and two trustees, while towns would have a supervisor and two board members.

If Buffalo had the same ratio of citizens to politicians as in West Seneca, the city would have 75 Common Council members, according to Gaughan.

A report he produced called "The Cost" claims redundant layers of government give the county 439 elected officials — more than the 435 elected to Congress. With their support staffs, these local officials cost taxpayers \$32 million a year.

He asked whether a county losing population and private-sector jobs can afford all its politicians.

While some elected officials in the county are concerned that smaller boards would give citizens a less accessible government, Gaughan said quite the opposite is true.

"There are thousands of towns across America with three-person boards, and they deliver services quite magnificently," he said.

Gaughan claims that as boards grew to include five, six, even seven people, members tried to justify their positions by taking on duties belonging to departments.

"I saw time and again boards meeting to vote on whether to purchase a wheelbarrow, or whether to allow a bonfire at a prom. Those duties don't need their involvement," he said. "Their only two responsibilities are to set overall policy and adopt a budget. It's a waste of time and taxpayer money."

He said shifting everyday responsibilities back to department heads would free up resources, strengthen government and increase services.

Piotrowski said informal polling has found most residents in favor of board size reduction, though the idea has been slower to take hold among politicians themselves.

"I haven't met anyone who is against the idea of fewer politicians," he said. "No one on the board is jumping up to support the idea, but I hope [that will change]."

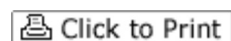
If it doesn't, both Gaughan and Piotrowski agreed, they will take the resolution to the streets to gather signatures for a ballot referendum in November.

"We don't need politicians to consent to reform. We can do it through the petition process," Gaughan said.

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