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## COMMENTARY

### Gaughan goes to heart of problem

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He took his traveling road show Monday night to Lancaster. He is the crusader for a cause, armed with the hammer of truth and a PowerPoint display in the battle against bloated government.

Kevin Gaughan has been battling since his landmark Chautauqua Conference a decade ago. It drove home the reality that we — no matter what city, town, village we live in — are all in this together.

The civic leader's latest weapon is "The Cost," a breakdown of the price we pay for 45 separate in-county governments stuffed with 439 elected officials. Annual taxpayer tab, including staff members: \$32 million.

The fight to dissolve the boundaries that divide us has gotten little toehold. So Gaughan — the uncrowned conscience of the community — is pushing every village and town board and city council to cut its size. If we cannot take down the walls of government, we can at least slice the number of politicians working within them.

It is another angle to attack the blob of bloat that siphons tax dollars and blinds us to any bigger picture. The myopia was on display in Lancaster's Village Hall, as several of the six trustees — in a village of fewer than 12,000 people — defended their political existence.

Reasons ranged from their responsiveness to citizens to delivery of services. These are sincere but self-serving notions. Consider: Each village resident is represented by a village trustee, a mayor, a town board member, a town supervisor, a county legislator, an assemblyman, a state senator, a county executive and various other officials. If there were any more representation, a politician would be bagging their groceries and walking their kids to school.

"The system is obsolete," said Gaughan, stick-thin and librarian-earnest. "Local government exists to create a public foundation for private investment, period."

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Gaughan deserves credit for going into the belly of the beast, for taking the argument right to the boards and councils he wants to downsize. He wants them to put the downsize question on the ballot, so people have the chance to choose. Gaughan said that several towns already are on board.

Folks are less protective of bloated government than politicians. Ninety percent of Depew voters last year backed a downsized Village Board, after Town of Tonawanda voters did the same.

“Big government is one of the sources of our problems,” Tony Matuszak said after Monday’s meeting. “It’s nonsense, these officials saying they can’t provide services if there are less of them.”

Some wonder why Gaughan is working the margins, instead of pushing to dissolve overlapping village/town boundaries. Gaughan thinks that cutting board members is simply more do-able. The end game, however, is the same.

“If [county] population continues to decline, the [dissolutions] will happen through financial crisis,” said Bill Cansdale, Lancaster’s enlightened mayor. “The weaker governments will go first.”

It would be nice if our 16 villages dissolved into their surrounding towns before crisis backed them into a corner. Unfounded fear is reform’s largest enemy.

Folks are afraid that a village, if deprived of its artificial boundary, will shed its character. Yet the City of Buffalo is a collection of separate neighborhoods, “villages” unto themselves.

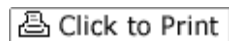
“Every city across America is a network of self-contained villages that are absent of any government boundary,” Gaughan said

Gaughan is less of a Don Quixote, tilting at imaginary windmills, than a Pied Piper. His 40-stop tour of town and village halls ends this spring. In tough times, his tune of smaller government is music to a lot of ears.

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