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Gaughan's downsizing message finds support in Lancaster

By Henry L. Davis NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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Kevin Gaughan's initiative to attack costly government bloat by downsizing the number of elected officials in Erie County is gaining traction.

After listening to the civic activist's Nov. 26 presentation, the Lancaster Village Board appears inclined to hold a referendum on downsizing the board from seven to five members.

The trustees are expected to discuss the matter tonight at their regular meeting.

"I was skeptical of Kevin's idea at first. But I was struck during his presentation by the staggering number of elected officials in Western New York. He made me realize that we can govern just as effectively with five people," said Mayor William Cansdale.

Cansdale said the presentation also brought an unexpected benefit: a chance for the trustees to put aside momentarily the day-to-day business of the board and to consider larger regional issues.

"We had a dialogue about how many people we need to represent the people in this village and how we go about our work. It was very healthy," he said.

Gaughan released a study last year on the size of local government in Erie County, which consists of 439 elected leaders and their immediate staffs in 44 villages, towns and cities. Support for that much government costs more than \$32 million in salaries and benefits each year, the study concluded.

Gaughan and other advocates of reform maintain that the size of government contrasts starkly with the area's economic and demographic trends.

The study also reported that Erie County exceeds other areas in the number of elected officials — twice as many as Indianapolis, five times more than in Charlotte, N.C., and eight times more than in the Baltimore area.



After spending months in preparation, Gaughan announced plans in November to appear before 45 town, village and city boards and councils to challenge them to downsize by eliminating two members through attrition.

"We have to find our way back to being a more prosperous region, and this is a great first step," said Gaughan, who is scheduled to appear tonight before the East Aurora Village Board. "People realize that we are not on the right path and have to change."

He said his initiative is not about criticizing local government but about encouraging elected officials to see the larger regional failure. Moreover, he suggests that municipalities slim down through attrition.

"As I listen to responses, I'm getting better at showing public servants that the problem isn't with the job they are doing, but with a system that includes 439 individuals," he said.

In Lancaster, an attempt to downsize by two trustees will face a technical hurdle.

The board consists of two elected trustees from each of three wards, as well as one at-large member. If the board decides to offer voters a say on downsizing, it may first need a referendum to do away with the ward system in favor of all at-large trustees. The effort may be helped if, as expected, several trustees decide not to seek re-election at the end of their terms, Cansdale said.

He said he believes there is support on the board for downsizing and anticipates it could be accomplished by the March 2009 general election.

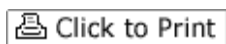
"In the end, it won't be our decision," Cansdale said. "We're talking about allowing the people to make the decision."

Gaughan's report and speaking schedule can be viewed online at www.TheCost.org.

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