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Lancaster taking idea of smaller government to heart

Persuaded by Gaughan's presentation, mayor wants to explore cutting Village Board by two

By Michelle Kearns NEWS STAFF REPORTER
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The skeptical interest of Village of Lancaster board members in cutting two members from the roster of seven was enough to signal that Mayor William Cansdale could begin the formal process required to shrink government — just as political activist Kevin Gaughan suggested two weeks ago.

"It takes time to accomplish this small step," said Cansdale on Monday evening. "Five can govern as well as seven."

At the meeting the trustees, each earning \$9,000 a year, discussed how the village could hold a preliminary vote Jan. 14 to begin the process of getting smaller.

"I'm willing to entertain anything, and if it saves the village taxpayers, I'm in," said Trustee Paul Maute.

Trustee Edward Marki wanted more time. He said he would support whatever would help make the village a stronger, more vibrant community.

"I'm for what really makes the village a better place, not just because some flashy guy comes in," he said of Gaughan.

Their consideration is a direct response to the proposal Gaughan has been explaining by Power Point presentations to municipalities throughout the county: Trim the large number of politicians — the 439 who represent 45 municipalities, the county included, and cost \$32 million a year. Cut every board by two, by letting people retire and not replacing those who choose not to run again, and savings would add up.

Gaughan, who considers the size bloated and crippling to the economy, calculated it this way: A reduction by two from the boards of Erie County's 25 towns, 16 villages and three cities would eliminate 88 members, saving \$6.4 million per year. Related staff that could also go would save another \$2.6 million. The annual total: \$9

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million.

To Gaughan, who expected the process to take two years, the changes required would be worth the time because two years of savings would equal \$18 million.

The logic managed to impress Cansdale, who had said before Gaughan spoke two weeks ago that he thought cuts were unnecessary. "I think we do a pretty good job," he said beforehand.

Instead, after listening, Cansdale spent the week researching how to make the change, asking the village attorney to look into the legal process of reducing the board by two.

"Looking for ways to save money is nothing new to me," Cansdale said to explain his interest at the meeting Monday night. "It's been the hallmark of my administration."

In 2000, the village began what would be a three-year process to merge its police department with the Town of Lancaster's. At the Monday meeting, there was another example of a money-saving merger: Treasurer Michael Stegmeier formally accepted the position of town clerk. The former clerk resigned and rather than replace her in the \$45,000 position, Stegmeier took over the job and got a raise — from \$41,340 to \$58,900. The town saved \$30,000, Cansdale said.

To cut board positions, the village should first stop having trustees represent geographic districts, village attorney Arthur Herdzig advised. Now there are two trustees for each of three wards. To cut two positions evenly and easily, it would be better to change the ward designations to more general "atlarge" positions, Herdzig said.

After that, trustee spots could be eliminated as people chose not to run for re-election. "We're certainly not going to terminate elected officials," he said.

Trustee Joseph Dennis, who declined to give his opinion, said he wanted to study more ways to save more money. "I'd still like to see a study done on all ways of saving money besides \$18,000," he said of the plan to cut two trustees.

Three trustees and the mayor, a voting member of the board, will be up for re-election in March 2009. Cansdale said he plans to run again, as did William Schroeder. Dennis and Gary Ambrose declined to say if they will seek re-election.

The news of the board's planned discussion had brought Ralph Adolph, 77, a Lancaster resident for 70 years, to the meeting hear it.

"It sounds promising," he said of the plans to get smaller. "I think they're on the right track."

Gaughan said he had been delighted by an e-mail from Cansdale explaining his change of mind.

"I walked on air for about five hours after that," said Gaughan by cell phone as he drove to East Aurora to give another Power Point talk.

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