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Erie County's 16 villages should merge with their towns, says consolidation activist Kevin Gaughan

By Gene Warner - News Staff Reporter

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Following a whirlwind eight-month tour of all 44 Erie County towns, villages and cities, citizen activist Kevin Gaughan today is proposing a drastic move — dissolving all 16 villages in the county.

Under his proposal, unveiled during a noon luncheon presentation at the Harbour Club downtown, Gaughan is proposing that each of the 16 village governments merge into its surrounding town by 2012.

"This reform will place us among those successful communities unburdened by overlapping governments, reduce taxes, free more public funds for service delivery, and most important, reconnect citizens with their communities," Gaughan states in his eight-page written report to the community.

In the report, titled "Ending the Age of Large Local Government," Gaughan zeroes in on the high costs county residents pay for their relatively oversized village governments.

The numbers show that the 16 villages account for some 9 percent of Erie County's population, but 23 percent of the elected officials throughout the county.

One example: the village of Orchard Park has 3,147 residents and six elected officials, according to Gaughan. For the city of Buffalo to have the same ratio of residents to elected officials, it would have to have 445 Common Council members. Instead, Buffalo has nine Common Council members.

Gaughan knows the opposition that will greet his proposal. Politicians will claim that village government is needed to create the loveliness of Orchard Park, Williamsville and East Aurora.

"But the same quality of life exists in places like Eggertsville, Wanakah and Snyder," Gaughan states in his report. "And while these locales maintain services and setting equal to villages, they are not incorporated

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governments that add to our tax burden."

A village, he added, is not a government.

"A village is an idea, a sense of place, a community."

During his tour of the county's 25 towns, 16 villages and three cities, Gaughan attended 150 town and village board meetings.

Witnessing those local meetings, formal affairs that follow Robert's Rules of order, is akin to traveling back to the age of horse-drawn carriages, gaslights and frock coats, Gaughan wrote.

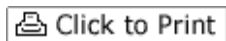
"Local government is our nation's most intimate level of government," his report states. "In Erie County it is also the most remote. By holding meetings in which decisions are pre-agreed — and limiting citizen participation — politicians have broken citizen spirit sufficient to have them all but give up.

"Which makes repairing the system more difficult."

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