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VILLAGE OF LANCASTER

Gaughan hears downsizing skeptics

By Michelle Kearns NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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Kevin Gaughan, a former Buffalo mayoral candidate and advocate of fewer local politicians, made his case for cutting local boards by two to some intrigued and cautious trustees of the Village of Lancaster on Monday.

After hearing a proposal to shrink the board of six trustees and a mayor by eventually letting two people retire and not be replaced, Trustee Joseph Dennis worried about the efficiency of a smaller Lancaster village, which is surrounded by the larger Town of Lancaster.

“The mandates are killing us,” he said of state rules for municipalities that part-time board members help execute. “All of us work as a team.”

“You start losing this kind of thing in the community,” said Dennis, who earns \$9,000 a year, “you’re going to lose this community.”

Yet Gaughan’s message at the trustees’ meeting, illustrated by a PowerPoint presentation, was designed to explain how Erie County is crippled by its 45 municipalities and 439 elected officials who cost a total of \$32,140,000 a year.

“That’s more than 10 times the average,” he said of the number of officials, adding that this spending saps funds that could help schools, parks and development.

Wasting scarce funds on these extra public servants, he said, threatens the future of these communities.

Gaughan’s litany of the failings bloated government contributed to Erie County included this tabulation: the shrinking population— some 212,000 have left since 1970; the 34,000 jobs lost since 1990; and the two control boards managing finances for Buffalo and Erie County.

More politicians mean more people to win approval with before any action toward change can be taken, he said,

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citing the stalled Peace Bridge plans. By Gaughan's count, to reduce elected municipal officials by two per municipality would cut 84 positions and save about \$17 million.

He also compared Erie County to other, thriving communities. Greater Charlotte, N.C., for example, had a 2005 population of about 752,000 with eight local governments, 135 elected officials and 17.5 births per thousand. Greater Buffalo, defined as Erie County, had a 2005 population of about 923,000, 45 local governments, 439 elected officials and 11.3 births per thousand.

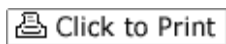
Like Dennis, Trustee Edward Marki had concerns. When he spoke to Gaughan, he repeated a point he had detailed earlier in the evening, before the presentation. Local boards are an instrument of democracy and can serve as a kind of public advocate that can be more elusive when boards shrink.

"The local governments are the purest form of democracy in the United States," he said.

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