

ENDING THE AGE OF LARGE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**A Report on Government and Community
Based on an 8-Month Tour of Erie County's
25 Towns, 16 Villages, and 3 Cities**

**Kevin Gaughan
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Student Researchers
State University of New York At Buffalo School of Law

Heather Anderson

Lindsay Heckler

Daniel Lesniewski

Bethany Mazur

Joshua Pennel

Heather Neu

Student Interns

Brad Hahn
Williamsville South High School

Marc Hamerski
Lake Shore High School

Web Site and Presentation Design

Dan Gigante

Video Imaging and Recording

Jason Hall

Communications

Christian Lafferty

Project Consultant

Lynn Bochenek

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Introduction

On my way to speak at the Brant town hall this past spring, I visited the town cemetery. Brant was the 29th stop on my tour of Erie County's 45 municipalities, and in each locale I tried to see as many historic sites as I could.

Brant Cemetery sits on the top of a rolling hill, overlooking southtown farmland with lush vegetable and fruit crops. The spring sun was setting on the first night of the season that didn't require a winter coat, and the air was fresh and bracing.

Walking among the rows of stones, I came upon the resting place of a Western New Yorker, Samuel Fuller, who fought in the American Revolution. As I read the inscription, a tow-headed little girl rode by on her bicycle. Her mother trotted alongside, holding the bike steady as the girl pedaled, unsure but determined.

The little girl was smiling. With her mom by her side, she was safe. And just as revolutionary soldier Samuel Fuller hoped and prayed and fought for, she was free.

Visiting Erie County's 25 towns, 16 villages, and 3 cities, I bowed my head at many memorials for fallen Western New Yorkers: at Buffalo's Old County Hall, where War of 1812 veterans were once buried; in Springville village square, which honors 14 boys lost at Gettysburg; at a Holland monument, built to remember their World War I doughboys; in front of Kenmore's Municipal Building, which exalts those who went ashore at Omaha Beach; at a Marilla home, where a mother still keeps a Gold Star in her farm window for a son lost in Viet Nam; and in Lackawanna, at the grave of a city boy who perished in Iraq.

During my 8-month journey, I wondered if any of those heroes could be with us today, what they would think of the condition of the community for which they died. Americans love their country. But they fight for their community. And thinking of the little Brant girl, I wondered if our region, with its dwindling population and dying economy, will be able to offer her a future when she grows up.

Too often in Buffalo Niagara, we think that history is something that happens somewhere else, but never here. But visiting every corner of Erie County, I learned the full, enriching, and uniquely American story that is Western New York.

I sat in an Amherst yard where Joseph Ellicott shaded himself; saw the Tonawanda plant where Theodore Roosevelt first waved his Rough Rider hat; visited the Springville home of Pop Warner; walked the Wales farm of "Elsie the Cow," the symbol of the American milk industry; and marveled at the Akron Falls. In Buffalo, I stood where in 1861 Abraham Lincoln, upon hearing of southern

troubles, wondered if he could save the Union; and where 101 years later, John Kennedy, upon learning of Cuba's nuclear weapons, wondered if he could save the planet.

And too easily, we believe that history is something that happened before we came along. But it's happening right now. And when we are judged by history's high court, the only question will be how we measure up; what we did with our community; and whether we discharged our duty to change, improve, and sustain it.

Conducting a study on the cost of local government, and undertaking to present its findings in every city, town, and village, was my small attempt to meet that obligation.

The Study: More Local Politicians than Any Like-Sized Community

The harsh realities of Western New York's failures are well known by citizens and much ignored by politicians: a quarter of a million residents moved out; 35,000 private sector jobs vanished; the fourth highest property taxes in the United States; hospitals, places of worship, libraries, beaches, and pools closed for lack of resources or population to sustain them; the first American community with not one but two control boards.

And perhaps most unsettling, the loss of 30% of people between the ages of 18 and 34, as our urban center, the City of Buffalo, became the nation's second most impoverished city.

Against this backdrop, and in an effort to understand how too much government causes too little growth, I examined local government. In collaboration with students from UB Law School, and under the auspices several foundations, I spent 2-3 weeks in every town hall, village hall, and city hall in Erie County.

The study found that Erie County has 439 elected officials, more than 10 times the number of politicians than any like-sized community in America – and more than the 435 members of Congress who represent the entire nation.

The study noted that the highest concentration of politicians exists in our suburban towns and villages. And it revealed that to sustain 439 elected officials, local taxpayers pay \$32 million per year.

The Tour: Seeking Smaller Government

Based on the study, I devised a solution that all 45 municipalities eliminate 2 elected officials through a program of attrition. And I realized that the only honest way to propose my reform was to look our politicians in the eye and ask them to change. I created a power-point talk, and set out to present it to every politician

in Erie County in public meetings and in front of local residents. The experience was among the most educational and inspiring of my life. And it was great fun.

I experienced local democracy in its shining hours, and at its saddest moments. I saw citizens shouted down by politicians, and politicians lifted up by their service. I heard an arrogant Blasdell mayor begin a conversation with, “this board does whatever we want,” and an eloquent Boston supervisor end a meeting with a touching tribute to a deceased colleague.

I witnessed endless examples of what James Madison called “citizen-patriots.” In West Seneca, residents overwhelmed a lazy town board to obtain a dance floor for a senior citizen center. In Collins, two persistent women halted the private use of a public town truck.

I rode a magnificent horse in Collins, and sat in a majestic house in Clarence. I met well-coiffed women in Amherst restaurants, and smudged, sullen kids on Alden side streets. And I sat with bright-eyed, Hispanic children in charter school uniforms, and laconic, rural teenagers in tattered clothes.

I spoke with public servants. And I listened to private citizens. Kind Western New Yorkers invited me into their homes after my presentations. And it was there, in kitchens and living rooms, that I learned the most.

Findings

1. Local Government Isn’t Broken; It’s Obsolete

Our town and village governments adhere to a process that hasn’t been changed in over 150 years. Witnessing a local government meeting – formal affairs that follow Robert’s Rules of order – is akin to traveling back to the age of horse-drawn carriages, gaslights, and frockcoats. When it took the better part of a day for a village to communicate with its town, or a full week to get a message to Albany, the system made sense. In 21st century America, it no longer does.

Local government is our nation’s most intimate level of government. In Erie County, it is also the most remote. By holding meetings in which decisions are pre-agreed – and limiting citizen participation even in the ruse – politicians have broken citizen spirit sufficient to have them all but give up. Which makes repairing the system more difficult.

2. No Drop of Rain Believes It Is Responsible for the Flood

In virtually every municipality in which I spoke, politicians agreed that there exists too much government and too many elected officials in Erie County. They then went on to explain why their town or village was the exception, and had just the right number.

3. The System Appears to Citizens as Being of the Governed, By the Governed, and For the Governed

A gap exists between working women and men and their local politicians – as a matter of compensation, health care insurance, and retirement pensions. This widening gap causes the traditional skepticism with which citizens view government to rise to cynicism, as citizens believe that their politicians lack a basic understanding of their lives and needs.

4. Local Politicians Do Work Best Done By Department Heads; Department Heads Do Work Best Done by Employees; and Employees Do Work That in Successful Communities is Done by Citizens

A town or village board is the public sector equivalent of a private company's board of directors: a body which exists solely to adopt budgets and set policy. Town and village department heads – police chief, budget director, highway superintendent – are like company presidents or comptrollers, charged with overseeing day-to-day operations.

As local population and public funds dwindled over the years, politicians' duties decreased accordingly. Faced with having to justify their position, officials began delving into activities and functions that require neither their time nor their attention. As a result, board meetings are largely taken up with formal motions and lengthy discussions on community garden walks, purchasing a lawn mower, the price of asphalt, where a senior prom will be held, and if you can believe it, roll call votes on whether to pay the bills.

In growing American communities, with soaring investment and lower taxes, citizens organize the "taste of" festivals, parents oversee prom night, and when they need more gravel, the highway department gets it without an hour-long debate by politicians pretending to understand. For in those communities, there is no incorporated local government.

And this practice of meddling in mundane matters is most pronounced in village governments.

5. Villages Account for 9% of Our Population and 25% of Our Politicians

The Village of Orchard Park has 3,147 residents and 6 elected officials. For the City of Buffalo to have the same ratio of residents to politicians, there would have to be 445 Common Council members. Buffalo has 9 Common council members.

For its population of 2,194, the Village of Angola has 6 politicians. If Buffalo had the same ratio, there'd be 638 Common Council members.

Including its two villages – Blasdell and Hamburg – the Town of Hamburg has 21 elected officials for its 56,487 residents. If Erie County had the same ratio of residents to politicians as Hamburg, there would be 237 members of the Erie County Legislature.

To sustain top-heavy village governments, more and more tax revenue is ending up in their coffers. For example, in 2006 Erie County's 16 villages received over \$7 million in sales tax revenues. My study revealed that it costs \$5.6 million per year to pay our village politicians.

6. A Village is Not a Government, It's a Community

In response to any assertion that village governments should downsize or merge, officials asserted that any reduction would harm services, setting, and quality of life. Their arguments are belied by evidence throughout Erie County and around the nation.

Alden, Akron, Blasdell, Sloan, and Angola are all villages. None have grown in decades. None can boast the bucolic setting they once enjoyed. And each has a poverty rate for children and the elderly among the highest in the county.

But politicians claim that village government is necessary 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. And while these locales maintain services and setting equal to villages, they are not incorporated governments that add to our tax burden.

In addition, from Maryland to Missouri, from Virginia to Florida, communities exist with exceptional services, public safety, zoning laws, and environmental and education standards that together create magnificent life quality. The only thing they lack, and we have in abundance, are incorporated village governments.

During the tour, listening to residents eager to contribute to their village, I heard frustration born of being thwarted rather than embraced by their politicians. And hearing them, I realized that a village is not a government. A village is an idea, a sense of place, a community.

7. The Argument: Bitterness Born of a Dying Economy

Too many town and village board meetings are rife with tension. In a community that's seen more factory layoffs than company startups, it's not surprising. But its corrosive effect is taking a toll.

In one town, an undercurrent of anger informed a 3-hour board meeting as citizens and politicians had at one another. Matters ranging from the color of the town tennis court to the police chief's scheduling practices were drenched in bitterness. It was like listening to an argument between a long-married couple. Like that private married couple, the public fight in town halls is set off by a minor slight or missed courtesy. But the real reason for everyone's edge is the lack of opportunity and hope that poisons our region.

Surprisingly, the disdain that some politicians express for citizens is exceeded only by the contempt they express for one another. In 8 months of talks, I seldom heard a village official say a kind word about a surrounding town official, or vice versa. Instead, they decried each other's roads, mocked the other's sanitation services, or claimed superiority in lawn care. In making these taunts, their true aim was to spread fear among residents that without their politicians, life in their town or village would be diminished.

8. The Age of Citizen Service

In the six decades since the World War II generation of sacrifice, parents, educators, business leaders, and clergy have extolled the virtue of service. The idea that a full and meaningful life is had by private sacrifice for a public good. And the message has gotten through.

For vast numbers of young Americans, giving their spare, vacation, or summer time in service is not just second nature, it's all they know. While previous generations spent spring vacations on Florida beaches, today's youth feed the elderly, teach the impoverished, or build for those ravaged by nature.

Our task is to create a local government system that no longer repels citizen responsibility, but depends on it. In the coming age of nation building – not overseas, but right here at home – Western New York must possess a nurturing public environment for private investment. Because the present system has proven unequal to the task, we must now give a new generation of engaged young citizens the chance to redeem us.

And we give the next generation that chance by eliminating unnecessary government levels.

9. Merging All Village Governments

As a first step, I propose dissolving all 16 villages in Erie County, and merging their services into their surrounding town.

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, re-connect citizens with their communities.

It will not diminish village services, but improve them. It will not harm quality of life, it will strengthen it. And in accordance with democracy's continued march toward increasing empowerment of citizens, it will place Western New York at the forefront of change that our struggling state needs and its residents demand.

Conclusion

In this undertaking, my students and I successfully encouraged several local governments to downsize or dissolve. Though not nearly enough.

But the knowledge we gained equips us to continue progress toward a more effective, less costly, and more fair system. One that boosts rather than burdens our economy. And one that inspires rather than incenses its citizens.

Thinking back on the experience of visiting every corner of our county, I remember beautiful farmland, urbane cityscapes, and dramatic vistas. I also recall abandoned buildings, broken spirits, and impoverished souls.

But most of all, I think of the landscape of ideas that Western New Yorkers possess. America has a vision of us as a feisty, tough people who overcome difficulties. But on this journey, I met a new type of Western New Yorker. One who wants to be known not for our setbacks, but for our achievements; not for hard knocks, but for kind hearts; and not for muddling through, but for excelling.

Local politicians may be stuck in problems and perceptions of yesterday. But citizens are building opportunities and realities of tomorrow. Smaller, more dynamic local government will help them succeed.

THE “SMALLER GOVERNMENT” TOUR

Governments visited	45
Community groups visited	31
Number of politicians who heard the presentation	415
Number of citizens who heard the presentation	25,140
Number of town board meetings attended	91
Number of village trustee meetings attended	59
Governments that limited the presentation	14
Governments that wouldn't permit citizen discussion	9
Governments that banned content of presentation	1
Number of times I mistakenly went to a village hall when I was scheduled to speak at a town hall, or vice versa	3
Miles traveled	2,135
Number of times I tired of the sound of my voice	often
Number of times my students tired of the sound of my voice	more often

ERIE COUNTY'S 16 VILLAGES

Aggregate village population	89,963
% of Erie County population	9%
Aggregate number of village politicians	102
% of Erie County's 439 politicians	24%
Cost to sustain village politicians per year	\$5,600,000
Aggregate sales tax amounts to villages	\$7,066,000
Average village budget increase, 2006-2007	7.8%
Aggregate village budget increase, 2006-2007	61.4%