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COMMENTARY

Bruce Andriatch: Downsizing, budgeting, NIMBY-ing

Bruce Andriatch

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Catching up with news from suburbia. . . Whether you agree with Kevin Gaughan or not, and whether you think having three-person town boards is a good thing, you have to be impressed with what he and his legion of volunteers accomplished last week.

In West Seneca and Evans, residents proved that the people still rule, that big money and political machines don't always win out. The real winner was not Gaughan; it was democracy.

But it would be wrong to view what happened there as an indication that Western New York is serious about real change in government.

It is relatively easy to say you will have three people as your policymakers, as opposed to five. For all the fear about losing representation, it's still there.

Real change will be when residents of a village flock to the polls to say they don't want a village government anymore, that having a town government within a county government within a state government within a federal government is plenty.

In recent years, voters have been reluctant to legislate away an entire part of their government, whether that meant consolidating town and village police departments or merging two school districts into one.


A key test will come Wednesday when Blasdell residents cast ballots on whether to consider the issue of dissolving their village.

A year ago, Gaughan was barred from even saying the words "consolidation" or "dissolution" when he spoke in Blasdell. Now residents can vote on whether to consider them.

Sounds like progress.

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Not one school budget in Erie County was rejected by voters this year. That shouldn't be surprising. Residents have learned that when a budget gets rejected, what gets cut are items such as sports and field trips that add up to a minuscule percentage of a budget plan.

In other words, we have been conditioned to vote yes.

But that doesn't mean the school budget vote is not worthwhile. Districts do not want to deal with the consequences of a budget failure, so superintendents and school boards generally present proposals with spending and tax increases that the public can swallow.

Without that public vote before them, it's worth asking whether this would still be the case.

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Some of the neighbors of the proposed Wegmans on Transit Road in Clarence are outraged that the supermarket is considering a site so close to their homes. They have organized and plan to be heard by the Town Board on Wednesday.

They certainly have the right to object, but it's going to be tough to win.

It would be one thing if the store were proposed for any other street, but this is four-lane-wide Transit Road, arguably the busiest and most desirable retail location in the region.

Maybe the neighbors didn't expect Wegmans. But if you live near Transit, you have to expect something.

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One other thing about the downsizing votes: A persistent criticism of the initiative was that reducing a town board by two members would not have much of an impact on taxes and that real savings could be found elsewhere.

It brought to mind the proverb about a child walking among countless starfish washed up on a beach. She picked one up and rescued it by throwing it back into the sea.

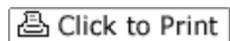
Someone saw her and told her that she was wasting her time, that her efforts would not make a difference.

The girl replied: "It makes a difference to this one."

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