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Erie County Legislator Timothy M. Wroblewski, a West Seneca Democrat, said voters in his town and Evans sent a message they want change.

Derek Gee / Buffalo News



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County Legislature likely to downsize

Votes in Evans and West Seneca sent a message to county

By Phil Fairbanks
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Evans and West Seneca are downsizing and the rippling effect of those landmark votes may be reaching Erie County government.

Just a day after voters in the two towns sent a message of change, county lawmakers began their own debate into downsizing the County Legislature.

And it's an effort with strong support. The proposal under review is to shrink the Legislature from 15 to 11 members and extend each lawmaker's term to four years rather than the current two years.

"The voters in Evans have made a statement," Legislator Robert B. Reynolds, a downsizing advocate who represents the town, said Thursday. "The public wants downsizing."

So does Reynolds and, by most accounts, a majority of the County Legislature. The only question is whether the new body will have 13, 11 or 9 legislators.

Before the Evans vote, Reynolds favored a 13-member Legislature. Today, the Hamburg Democrat is willing to cut deeper.

"I will go to 11," he said Thursday. "That vote definitely sent a message."

The other lawmaker watching the town votes with interest is Legislator Timothy M. Wroblewski, the West Seneca Democrat who once served on the Town Board.

"The folks who took the time to vote sent a message," Wroblewski said. "They want change."

And like Reynolds, so does he. Wroblewski supports cutting the Legislature but isn't sure if the number of eliminated positions should be two or four seats.

"I'm in support of downsizing," he said. "But is it 13? Is it 9? I don't know what the number is."

As lawmakers facing reelection, Reynolds and Wroblewski are smack dab in the middle of what could become a popular campaign issue for their opponents.

Reynolds, who has been targeted for defeat by County Executive Chris Collins, is in what is expected to be a particularly hard re-election battle against former television reporter Lynne Dixon.

Trimming the Legislature's size or lengthening its terms of office requires more than a vote of the Legislature. It also requires a public referendum.

"My hope is they will let the voters decide," said Martha Lamparelli, head of the citizens commission that proposed the county downsizing.

Lamparelli was on hand Thursday to brief lawmakers on the what and why of what her 21st Century Commission is recommending.

Most of the commission's nine members favor a smaller Legislature as a way of saving \$250,000 a year and more closely reflecting the county's declining population.

The group also favors four-year terms as a way of letting lawmakers focus on policy-making and constituent service rather than campaigning and fundraising.

Thursday, the commission found a largely sympathetic audience in the very people it wants to cut.

“The time to demonstrate leadership is now,” said Legislator Timothy Kennedy, a Buffalo Democrat who wants to cut four seats.

The Legislature has toyed with the idea of downsizing for years, but Kennedy said the numbers tossed around were always arbitrary. He said the commission’s report offers the first concrete rationale on why the final number should be 11 legislators.

Legislature Chairman Lynn Marinelli, a Town of Tonawanda Democrat who created the commission, thinks it’s just as important to respond to the strong message being sent by voters in West Seneca, Evans and elsewhere.

“I think they’re frustrated with government,” Marinelli said. “And I think there’s anxiety about the times.”

The push for downsizing is not without opposition, especially among urban lawmakers who fear a loss of representation, especially among minorities.

“There are many in my community who have an historical fear of not being included after years of not being included,” said Legislator Betty Jean Grant, a Buffalo Democrat.

If voters go along and shrink the Legislature and lengthen the terms, the changes would be implemented with the election of 2011.

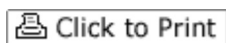
And that may be just the beginning.

Downsizing supporters, buoyed by success in Evans and West Seneca, now have plans to put a similar measure on the ballot in November in Alden, Hamburg and Orchard Park.

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