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Activist sees issue ripen after 15 years

Donn Esmonde

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I am happy that he is still around. I am glad that he is still in the same single-level house on the corner of Crittenden Road with the American flag flying on the back porch. I am pleased that he is, at age 70, seeing communities warm to the cause he championed in vain 15 years ago.

Bob Overhoff did not change. Other people changed. More of them have seemingly come around to his belief that we pay too much for government that delivers too little. Fifteen years of worsening economics, higher taxes and deeper disgust with politicians has apparently improved the climate for change.

Folks in West Seneca and Evans last week voted to downsize their town boards, following the lead of the village of Lancaster. Civic leader Kevin Gaughan is bringing the downsizing question to other communities. Voters in North Collins this fall will decide whether to dissolve the village.

It all sounds familiar to Overhoff. In 1994, he started the push to dissolve the village of Alden. The ex-village cop—despite pushback from the village mayor, board and workers—got the question on the 1996 ballot. Residents rejected it by a 2-to-1 margin.

“Because of [Gaughan’s] initiatives and the economy, I think the issue is ripe again,” said Overhoff. “Not just for Alden, but for all villages.”

Overhoff’s middle is thicker and his step is slower than 15 years ago, but the sandpaper rasp and speak-his-mind mandate have not changed. Neither has, he believes, the common sense of the cause: Save tax dollars by erasing an unneeded layer of government.

“You can get the same services from the town, with a lighter tax load,” he told me on a recent morning at his kitchen table. “You still have the same address, the same phone number, you shop in the same stores. The character of the village doesn’t change.”

Before there was a Kevin Gaughan, there was a Bob Overhoff. Yesterday’s extremist is often today’s visionary. Overhoff saw a village of about 2,500 people with a mayor, trustees, clerk, building inspector, judge, attorney,



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plow drivers and sanitation workers—all of it duplicated in the surrounding town of about 8,000. Repeat the picture across the county's other 15 villages. Redundancies 'R Us.

Village officials predictably played to peoples' fears, claiming that the village's character would change and services would disappear. Overhoff thinks he knows the real reason village officials dug in against change, aside from having relatives on the payroll.

“They enjoy that little bit of power and prestige,” he said. “They don't want to give up their plums.”

Overhoff's activism came at a personal price. Village workers he had known for years snubbed him on the street. The then-mayor blamed him for “dividing” the community and, at one Village Board meeting, ordered Overhoff to take off his baseball cap. He refused.

“If I believe something, I feel like I have a right to say it,” he said. “What people might think doesn't bother me.”

Folks lately stop him on the street and suggest he revive the battle. Overhoff— after failing to abolish the village court a couple of years ago—no longer has the fire for the fight.

“You get a lot of resistance,” he said. “When people say that maybe it's time to try it again, I say, ‘OK, you do it.’ ”

It is tough to overhaul a place where everybody knows everybody else. Maybe your kid plays ball with a trustee's kid, or your wife works on a church committee with the mayor. The connections are everywhere. I admire anybody who takes on this kind of a cause.

Overhoff tried, and failed. Fifteen years later, he merely looks like a man ahead of his time.

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