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COMMENTARY

Donn Esmonde: Citizens cut government down to size

Donn Esmonde

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Maybe from now on, politicians will stop standing between people and their right to have a say in their own government.

Public officials are elected to serve us, not to stand in our way. Yet, with a couple of exceptions, obstructionists on our multitude of town and village boards refuse to willingly let citizens decide on downsizing—all while cashing taxpayer-funded paychecks. Talk about people not getting their money's worth.

Judging by the results of Wednesday's downsizing votes in West Seneca and Evans, board members everywhere are placing self-preservation ahead of the public interest.

Folks in West Seneca and Evans chose overwhelmingly Wednesday to downsize their town boards by two members apiece. Despite (or, more likely, because of) widespread discontent with the layers and cost of local government, the two five-member boards did not go willingly to the ballot.

Board members in both towns refused—as have nearly all of the county's 41 town and village boards—to simply put the downsizing question to a public vote. Board members in West Seneca actually spent taxpayer dollars on a futile lawsuit to deny people the right to vote on the size of their own government. Talk about a citizen smack-down.

In both towns, a volunteer army recruited by civic leader Kevin Gaughan gathered enough petition signatures to force the downsizing question to a vote. Compared to any anti-tax "tea party," this was a full entree of citizen revolt.

Wednesday, folks enjoyed the just desserts of reform.

"It is a simple idea, that people deserve a better form of government," said Gaughan. "This [vote] gave people a voice in shaping their own community."

We spoke Thursday in his sparse office in the downtown Liberty Building. Scattered across his desk were scraps

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of paper bearing names and phone numbers of volunteers.

Gaughan is a stick-thin Buffalo attorney who, either out of a sense of communal duty or a penchant for self-abuse, has devoted his professional life to pushing civic reforms. He drives a decrepit 1998 Mercury Marquis, supports himself with sporadic legal work and funds his causes through private and charitable donations. He has a gift for rallying volunteers through strength of cause and force of personality.

The downsizing effort sprang out of his 2006 study of the mammoth size of local government, which Gaughan—in a six-month tour—presented to each of the county’s 41 town and village boards. He hoped that they would allow people to vote on downsizing the boards or dissolving villages. Instead, most of the boards dug in their heels, prompting Gaughan to force downsizing votes in select towns through petitions.

The door-to-door campaign in West Seneca and Evans involved a 150-volunteer army. Coordinator Lynn Bochenek said each town was divided into districts, headed by volunteer “captains,” with nearly every house visited more than once. In the past 10 months in West Seneca, Gaughan knocked on more than 4,000 doors.

Granted, cutting a couple of board members in each of two towns barely makes a dent in the layers of government armor. But it opens the door to deeper change and shows people that— when given the chance—they can make a difference. The cause was fueled by the frustration of folks in a free-falling region who pay too much for government that delivers too little.


“This was not just about downsizing government,” said Gaughan. “It restores a sense of possibility in people’s minds that they can change things.”

It also sends a message to politicians in every village and town: Give people a say in their government, or they will take it.

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