 Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Donn Esmonde: Lancaster is learning: Less is more

By Donn Esmonde
News Columnist

Updated: 05/31/09 7:45 AM

The sky has not fallen. The earth has not moved. The walls have not crumbled.

Voters in the Village of Lancaster last November—in a 95-to-5 percent landslide— cut the size of the Village Board. The seven supposedly indispensable members were—as of April 1—sliced to five.

I sat down with them the other day. All agreed that the board has not just gotten smaller. It has gotten better.

“We’re getting the job done faster with fewer people,” Trustee Ed Marki said. “It’s more efficient.”

The words reverberate beyond the village border. Wednesday, voters in West Seneca and Evans decide whether to downsize. If you believe the claims of the endangered trustees, the towns will all but collapse without them.

Somehow I do not think a shortage of elected officials is something we have to worry about. Take a step back, and we are—with 16 villages, 25 towns and three cities within the county line— among the most politically over-represented people in the nation.

Village residents, for instance, are “served” by a village trustee, a village mayor, a town trustee, a town supervisor, a county legislator, a state senator, a state assemblyman and a multitude of staff and support people. Precious few Americans have as many places to go with a complaint about a broken streetlight or a cracked sidewalk.

The more jobs that disappear, the more people who flee, the louder the question: Why do we need all of these politicians?

Endangered trustees in West Seneca and Evans are playing to voters’ fears, saying that cutting board members will lower bond ratings and force the hiring of more workers.

The claims drew puzzled looks from the Lancaster trustees.



“Bond raters are concerned with your financial position and long-term plans,” said Mayor Bill Cansdale. “And there was no need to hire more people. We just set the direction. We have full-time people who do the village’s work.”

The way I see it, folks in West Seneca and Evans—with other towns to follow—have a small but significant shot at cutting overstuffed government down to size.

Granted, Lancaster went from seven trustees to five. West Seneca and Evans voters are weighing a drop from five to three. But look at the bigger picture, and I think that—when it comes to elected officials—less is more.

According to a study (www.thecost.org) by civic leader Kevin Gaughan, the point man on the downsizing fight, we have far more elected officials than places—from Charlotte to Baltimore—that are doing far better than we are. Indeed, the layers of politicians—and accompanying payrolls—is part of our problem. The Balkanization not only costs us \$32 million annually in salaries and benefits, I think it solidifies small-picture, me versus you thinking. Town board members are not paid a fortune. But add up perks and benefits, factor in layers of government, include various jobs handed out by members to relatives and friends, and I think there is a large case to be made for fewer people.

“You’ve got these behind-the-scenes appointments, with elected officials adding jobs,” said Marki. “You end up with 10 people doing something that years ago was done by three people.”

As jobs keep disappearing and people keep fleeing, even elected officials wonder what good all of this government does us.

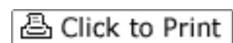
“We’re better now with just five [trustees], and if we had to, we could do it with three,” said Cansdale. “Inevitably, I think the village will just dissolve [into the town].”

In Lancaster, what was lost has not been missed.

desmonde@buffnews.com

Find this article at:

<http://www.buffalonews.com/donnesmonde/story/687922.html>



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.