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# Downsize county's Legislature

## Lawmakers should heed panel advice, put 11-member body to November vote

The popular vote that downsized two town boards this month sends a powerful message of taxpayer dissatisfaction, but the current proposal to cut back on the number of Erie County legislators will have an even wider impact on local government. The Legislature should approve the reduction, and let voters make the final decision in November.

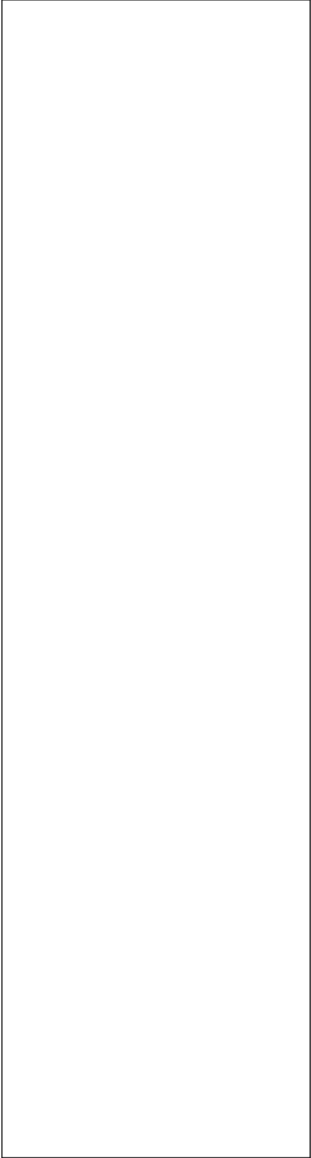
This proposal is less grass-roots than the town measures, and grows out of a commission study launched by the Legislature itself. The political will for downsizing is there, although there is disagreement on just how deeply to cut. The Legislature should follow its commission's recommendation and shrink from 15 members to 11.

In financial terms, a smaller Legislature could save \$250,000 a year and better reflect the county's declining population.

Reducing the size of the Legislature in a fiscally challenged county has been a topic of discussion for years, and Legislature Chairwoman Lynn Marinelli, D-Tonawanda, created a study commission and appointed onetime political rival Martha Lamparelli as head. Impaneled in September, the 21st Century Commission on the Erie County Legislature recommended reducing the size of the Legislature from 15 to 11 seats, and extending lawmakers' terms of office from two to four years. Political momentum has been building for a compromise reduction to 13 seats.

Few disagree with a reduction in the number of seats to better reflect population loss, although three commission members dissented over issues such as ensuring representing the diversity of community interests, geographical or political. Much of the debate centers on urban representation, given splits in political party support and racial percentages in the city and the rest of the county. While an argument can be made regarding that representation, the focus on the county legislative level is more on countywide policy than on constituent issues within districts where residents are served directly by local levels of government.

More problematic is the recommendation to extend the term of office for legislators from two to four years to allow them the chance to spend more time on policy than on the next election cycle. A similar presumption was



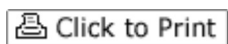
made regarding the term extension of Buffalo Common Council members several years ago, and the jury is still out on the effectiveness of that move.

The commission also determined that term limits are not appropriate, arguing that the public already can impose a term limit on any legislator by voting that member out of office in the next election. That's a valid argument, and more credible on its own than the commission's stated concern over the possible creation of a Legislature of neophytes at the expiration of the term—a worst-case scenario that only arises because the commission also recommended against staggered terms for fear of poor voter turnout and confusion. Staggered terms, the simple solution, would avoid a huge influx of new and inexperienced members in any one election.

The full Legislature will now deal with the commission's suggestions, and can modify those recommendations before putting them before Erie County voters as a referendum on the November ballot. Changes would be implemented with the election of 2011, following the necessary redrawing of Erie County legislative districts. The Legislature should not close the voters' window of opportunity.

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