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Lynn M. Marinelli named panel to study downsizing.
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Downsizing Legislature is favored by panel

By Matthew Spina
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

A special citizens commission recommends shrinking the Erie County Legislature from 15 members to 11 and extending each lawmaker's term to four years rather than continuing with the current two-year terms.

The ideas now move to the full Legislature — which is free to modify the suggestions before putting them before Erie County's voters.

Trimming the Legislature's size or lengthening the terms of office requires a referendum, which is expected this November when a slew of political races around the county also will be decided.

If voters go along and shrink the Legislature and lengthen the terms, the changes would be implemented with the election of 2011, after Erie County redraws its legislative districts in a once-a-decade process.

The "21st Century Commission," in its report made public Tuesday, said that a smaller Legislature will save money, about \$250,000 a year, and four-year terms will let lawmakers focus on policy-making and on their constituents rather than on electioneering and campaign fundraising.

The commission did not recommend staggered terms, so all lawmakers would continue to seek re-election in the same year and voters could still remove a majority of incumbents in any election.

The commission studied but did not recommend term limits, fearing they could some day lead to a bumper crop of neophytes taking office.

With an 11-member Legislature, seven lawmakers would be recognized as the two-thirds majority that could override a veto or raise sales taxes and county fees, said Martha Lamparelli, the commission chairwoman.

"We'll see what happens," said Lamparelli, who once was a Legislature candidate herself. "My hope is that they will let the voters decide," she said of the 15 county lawmakers.

Lamparelli had run in 2003 against Lynn M. Marinelli, the current Legislature chairwoman. Marinelli in September created the commission, appointed a majority of its 11 members and named Lamparelli to lead it.

Marinelli was responding to forces, both internal and external, pushing for another Legislature downsizing. The Legislature had 20 members in the 1970s but has had 15 since 2004.

Civic activist Kevin Gaughan was pushing for a smaller Legislature just as he was pushing for smaller legislative bodies around Erie County because government, too, he reasoned, should adjust for the declining population.

Gaughan persuaded Legislator Thomas A. Loughran, D-Amherst, to introduce a measure reviving calls for a nine-member Legislature. It immediately drew support from lawmakers who had backed the idea months before — Democrat Kathy Konst of Lancaster and Republicans John J. Mills of Orchard Park and Michael H. Ranzenhofer of Amherst, now a state senator.

Marinelli, urging a more sweeping review of the Legislature's size and function, empaneled the commission on her own with a power she wields as the head of the Legislature. At the time, however, Marinelli figured the commission would not issue its report in time for a referendum this year, when all 15 lawmakers—12 Democrats and three Republicans — are up for new two-year terms.

Now a referendum appears likely in the already heated atmosphere of this year's races.

In an interview Tuesday, Marinelli thanked the commission for its thoughtful approach to the matter but did not endorse an 11-member Legislature.

She said she's concerned about the representation of minorities and does not want the urban voice diluted. Marinelli, a Democrat from the Town of Tonawanda, represents an urban and suburban district that includes part

of Buffalo.

“I think the reality is there will be a downsizing,” she said but stressed that lawmakers will be free to suggest other numbers. “I’d rather see a positive result, meaning something happens, rather than nothing happens. And I will work as chair toward that goal.”

Downsizing votes could also be on the November ballot for the towns of Alden, Hamburg and Orchard Park, Gaughan said.

“I think the commission’s recommendation is a large step forward in our effort to modernize local government, save taxes and, most importantly, give Erie County a chance to grow again,” Gaughan said.

“I think as well, the commission action reflects the powerful countywide yearning to downsize government and finally do something about the fact we have the fifth-highest local property taxes in America.”

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