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Downsizing hearing set for Niagara Legislature

Proposal would cutsize from 19 to 15

By Thomas J. Prohaska
NEWS NIAGARA REPORTER

LOCKPORT — The Niagara County Legislature speeded up the pace of its own reduction Tuesday, voting to hold a public hearing July 28 on cutting its size from 19 to 15, with the intention of placing the measure on the ballot this November instead of next year.

Before Tuesday, the plan was for a special committee to be appointed to study the question, with the goal of holding a referendum on a smaller Legislature in 2010.

But the Legislature decided to make sure there is a vote this year, while leaving open the possibility of making the number even smaller later on.

“This isn’t a new concept. Legislators have been talking about this since 2001,” said Majority Leader Richard E. Updegrove, R-Lockport.

That was when a county charter that recommended a 15-member Legislature failed at the polls. But the main issue in that referendum was the creation of a county executive in the same charter.

“I think it’s inappropriate to attach other items to this particular issue,” Updegrove said.

Minority Leader Dennis F. Virtuoso, D-Niagara Falls, joined the unanimous vote in favor of the public hearing, but he decried what he considered a rush job.

“I agree we should be downsizing our Legislature, but we should do our due diligence. We should have a study to see if 15 is the right number. Maybe 11 is the right number, or nine,” Virtuoso said.

Legislator Paul B. Wojtaszek, R-North Tonawanda, said action was needed because the Legislature’s summer hiatus means that it will only have one more meeting before Labor Day. Sixty days’ notice is needed to get a



proposition on the November ballot.

“Downsizing is the buzzword of the day. I don’t want to downsize without adequate information,” said Legislator Renae Kimble, D-Niagara Falls. “To say 15 is the right number is very arbitrary.”

A few minutes later, Virtuoso asked Updegrove to change the number in his proposal from 15 to nine, but Updegrove declined — for now.

“We can change this number again. This is a starting point,” he said. “In theory, I am not opposed to [nine].”

Legislator John D. Ceretto, R-Lewiston, had sponsored a resolution for a smaller Legislature last fall. “At the time I thought 11 would be a good number. I support this resolution because it’s action,” he said.

Chairman William L. Ross, C-Wheatfield, said he still intends to appoint a special committee after the election to study other possible changes, such as whether a smaller Legislature should have term limits, or longer terms than the current two years. Another issue the panel will confront is whether the members of the smaller Legislature deserve more pay.

At present, Niagara County legislators earn \$15,075 a year, with the party leaders receiving an extra \$500 and the chairman an additional \$3,000. Those figures haven’t changed in 10 years.

Ross’ committee would include three legislators — probably the vice chairman and the party leaders—and six citizens, none of whom would be elected or appointed officials nor an officer of a political party.

If the referendum were to pass, the smaller Legislature would be elected for the first time in 2011.

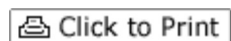
On another matter, the Legislature directed County Manager Gregory D. Lewis to report by next April on the feasibility of re-creating the county’s tax stabilization fund and limiting property tax increases to 2.5 percent per year.

The measure is only a study and does not commit the county to taking the step, said the sponsor, Legislator Danny W. Sklarski, D-Town of Niagara.

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