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Downsizing wind blows stronger

More communities exploring issue

By Mary B. Pasciak

If anyone in West Seneca is glad to see Kevin Gaughan and his government downsizing allies gone, it's Vincent J. Graber Jr.

After 12 years on the West Seneca Town Board, Graber will lose his seat Jan. 1 as a result of last week's vote to cut the board.

But as much as Graber disdains Gaughan and the downsizing effort, he grudgingly concedes one point: The power of voters unleashed last week in Evans and West Seneca is a force to be reckoned with.

"This was an indictment against politicians," Graber said. "So if you're a politician in Western New York, you better receive the message."

Last week's downsizing votes seem to be just the prelude to trimming government in Erie County.

The County Legislature appears willing to be shrunk. People in at least three more towns will likely cast ballots in November to cut their town boards.

The possible reforms don't stop with trimming positions. Some people say the time has come to eliminate villages.

Blasdell residents will vote Wednesday on whether the village should study the issue. The Village of North Collins already is well on its way down that path. People in Williamsville soon may vote on whether to dissolve their village.

And Gaughan vows there's much more to come.

"Every town will downsize its board by two," the Buffalo attorney predicts. "And I think residents of the majority of the 16 villages will decide to dissolve their governments."

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In light of the double victory for downsizing last week, more people are starting to think there's a good chance Gaughan is right about the outcome, whether they agree with him or not.

"Any time you have a chance of running against politicians, I think you're going to do pretty well," said Michael V. Haselswerdt, professor of political science at Canisius College.

Recent history has borne that out.

Voters in Depew decided in 2007 to downsize the Village Board to five members. The next year, Lancaster residents followed suit. Each time, more than 85 percent of voters supported the change.

Last week, two-thirds of West Seneca and Evans voters supported moving from five to three board members. Although the cost savings will be nominal, many people said they were eager to start somewhere.

"There's just too much government for what we need," said Richard Myers, a maintenance worker who lives in Evans.

Those who opposed the downsizing said they worried that a three-member board would put power into the hands of too few. They fear that the state's Open Meetings Law will routinely be violated.

Now that a board of three will soon become reality, some say it's time for residents to provide checks and balances themselves.

"We citizens need to step up and be more vigilant now than ever before," said Dan Warren, who campaigned vigorously against the downsizing in West Seneca.

Power to mobilize

Many elected officials have little love for Gaughan. Some say if he wants to cut government, he should start with something less flashy that would yield more savings, like consolidating sewer districts. Others say his priority is seeing himself on TV, not reforming government.

"Kevin Gaughan's mission is absolutely nothing but to make a name for Kevin Gaughan," said Karen Erickson, who will lose her seat on the Evans Town Board because of last week's vote.

Despite the disdain many officials have for Gaughan, a growing number recognize the apparent power he has to mobilize volunteers who circulate petitions to put a referendum on the ballot.

For months, for instance, he has focused on Blasdell, a small village in the Town of Hamburg. Village officials there, hoping to head him off, decided in April to offer a referendum on whether to spend up to \$200,000 to conduct a study to dissolve the village. Residents will vote Wednesday on that, as well as measures to cut trustees' pay and impose term limits.

Blasdell officials believe residents want to keep the village.

"Most of the citizens I've spoken to disagree with Gaughan," said Trustee David Adrian. "Most residents are quite confident that our level of service, our ability to quickly react to things, would not be equaled at the town level."

The Village of North Collins got a \$49,500 grant from the state to study the issue. No public vote there was needed, because the board decided to pursue this on its own. With 1,100 residents, the village has just four full-time employees and a budget of less than \$700,000.

If the study shows dissolution would be feasible, the village could be gone by the end of 2011, just in time for its

100th anniversary, according to Mayor John Mrozek.

“I think inevitably, there’s going to be some pain associated with change,” he said. “But downtown North Collins is always going to be downtown North Collins, whether it’s a village or a hamlet.”

Let people decide

The downsizing victories in Evans and West Seneca last week seem to have won some converts.

County legislators who once opposed downsizing their 15 members are reversing course, now that they see a November referendum is inevitable.

At the town and village level, a growing number of officials say the time has come to let the residents decide. Gaughan has said volunteers will gather enough signatures to force downsizing referendums in November in Hamburg, Orchard Park and Alden. Amherst and Cheektowaga are next on the list, he said. He plans to circulate petitions to schedule votes to dissolve the Village of Blasdell, then Williamsville.

“People want to be heard. They’re gathering. They’re organizing. They want elected officials to know their voice counts. So I say, let them be heard,” said Amherst Council Member Shelly Schratz.

She plans to reintroduce a resolution later this month to schedule a referendum to downsize her board from seven to five members.

Gaughan says that once voters throughout the county have their say, the region will turn a corner and begin to recover from its economic malaise.

“It’s a pivotal time now,” he said.

The importance of such changes is debatable, some say.

“In 10 years or 15 years or 20 years, are we going to be better off as a region or a county because of this?” asked Canisius’ Haselswerdt. “I think it’s going to be very hard to argue that our failures or our successes are due to how many governments there are or how big they are.”

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