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**Bloated local government is corroding our sense of self**

### Excessive government is wounding WNY

By Kevin Gaughan  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

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In recent years, two great and historic American communities were destroyed: New Orleans and Western New York. The New Orleans region was ravaged overnight by nature. Buffalo Niagara was devastated over several decades by economics. In New Orleans, federal and state governments were unable to do anything about it. Here in our community, local government is unwilling.

In the past two years, I've attended 227 Town Board, Village Board and County Legislature meetings throughout Western New York. After conducting a study on the cost of local government, I devised a solution to our inordinately high number of politicians, and began

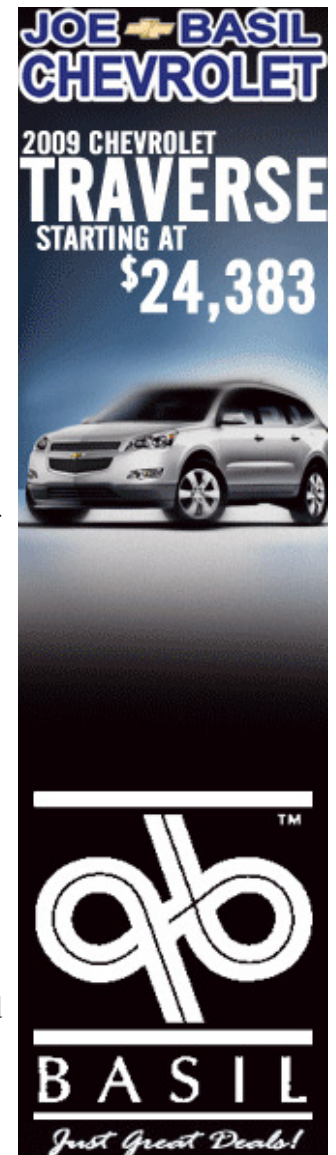
organizing citizens in petition drives to let people decide whether to downsize government. During this effort, I've met with more than 400 elected officials; addressed 146 taxpayer groups; spoken at 35 colleges and high schools; and traveled more than 2,700 miles while visiting every corner of our community.

Most important, I've listened to thousands of Western New Yorkers tell their stories of lost jobs and disappearing pensions; increased gas prices and decreased incomes; closed plants, hospitals and congregations; and opening gaps between the quality of their lives and those who purport to serve them.

Here's what I learned: What we have here in Western New York is even greater than we think. The degree to which local government holds us back is even worse than we know. And the national recession's effect on private citizens, versus its affect on public servants,

reveals just who are the "slum dogs" and who are the "millionaires."

The harsh realities of Western New York's failures are well known by people and much ignored by politicians: 249,000 residents lost; 45,000 private- sector jobs vanished; the fifth-highest property taxes among America's 3,086 counties; our urban center of Buffalo now America's third-poorest city; appallingly high birth defects;



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shockingly low literacy; and our recent addition to a list of the “10 Fastest Dying” areas in the nation.

All that happened before the national economy collapsed on top of our already moribund local one. When America gets the flu, Western New York gets cancer. And with our region’s now record high 9 percent unemployment rate and accelerating exodus of young people—we’ve lost 30 percent of residents between ages 18 and 34 — it appears that yet another part of us is about to succumb.

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of our flat-lining pulse is a recent proposal that a local church — ornate, historic and vacant — be dismantled piece by piece and shipped to a vibrant Georgia town. Is this to be the fate of a community that built the Erie Canal, harnessed the power of the Niagara River and created the steel that fortified a nation?

Presiding over this sorry state are 439 elected officials—more than the 435 politicians who represent the entire nation in the U. S. Congress. Local taxpayers’ cost of sustaining these 439 and their staffs exceeds \$32 million per year. Which means that during the recent decade in which we suffered unprecedented setbacks while America created unparalleled wealth, we paid local public servants \$320 million—more than a quarter of a billion dollars.

And since I published my local government study in 2006, we’ve paid them \$96 million more.

When I asked our 45 local governments to voluntarily sacrifice by eliminating two elected positions, with a ferocious roar they claimed that if any such thing happened, life as we know it would end. Little did they realize that’s precisely what most residents want. For in slow motion, against our will, and in both discreet and obvious ways, Western New York has become a two-company town: politicians and poverty. Until we reduce the former, we’ll never be able to address the latter.

### **Why downsize?**

Downsizing local government will reap 10 benefits:

- Decrease property taxes on families and businesses.
- Increase citizens’ voice in their community.
- Reduce the decibel level of politicians’ endless squabbling.
- Expand funds for local services.
- Return town boards to their original size.
- Create transparency, and change meetings from lectures to conversations.
- Provide the necessary first step in reforming state government.
- Align local government with institutions (hospitals, places of worship, companies) that have consolidated to adapt to population loss.
- Revive the role of public referendum in New York State.
- Restore our belief that we can change. If we pay \$32 million per year for our politicians, the question is where does that money come from? A comparison of property taxes for a home valued at \$150,000 in Erie County, versus in other like-sized American communities with whom we compete, provides the answer.

In Cheektowaga, local taxes for a \$150,000 home are \$5,414.99; in Baltimore County, Md., they’re \$3,402.40. In Williamsville, you pay \$4,264.17; in Greater Indianapolis, \$2,250.00. And if your \$150,000 home sits in West Seneca, your local tax bill is \$4,097.13; in Charlotte, N. C., it’s \$1,258.05. Any business owner looking to

relocate sees our tax rates and never bothers to see our community. That's why we lose.

And that's why reducing this heavy load from our narrow shoulders is an essential step on our road to recovery. My proposal to dissolve village governments, eliminate two seats from every town board and decrease our County Legislature from 15 to nine members would save Erie County taxpayers \$10.2 million per year, or \$102 million over the next decade. And my discovery that we can achieve all of this through the petition process places these savings within our reach.

### **Citizens have little say**

Virtually every town and village board member I interviewed agreed that there is too much government and there are too many pols in our community. They then went on to explain that their municipality is the exception, that it needs the board size it now has and that any change would deprive residents of "diverse views." They have, it turns out, a rather peculiar definition of diversity.

Attending a local government meeting in Western New York is like attending a lecture. Citizens are told to sit down, remain quiet and not make any quick moves. With most decisions already reached in a "work session" — appropriately named as they're usually held during the work day to prohibit citizen attendance — the meetings are overly formal shows in which board members vote unanimously on virtually every matter they consider.

Their agendas include votes on whether to purchase a wheelbarrow (Concord); set the location of the high school dance (Cheektowaga); purchase gravel (Tonawanda); hold a garden walk (Williamsville); or change a thermostat setting (Amherst — a debate politicians had for 40 minutes on the night they refused for the fourth time to let residents vote on downsizing).

After seeing more than 200 meetings like this, I find it easy to understand why citizens have given up. But giving up is giving in, and the dire straits in which we find ourselves is the unacceptable price for that.

Local government should be our most intimate level of government. In Erie County, it's the most remote. Downsizing boards would force politicians to let residents take responsibility for garden walks and Halloween parades, as they do in other American communities, for free. It would deformalize meetings, dismantle the wall that town and village boards erect and transform what is today a lecture by politicians into a conversation among people.

And by ending the practice of politicians hoarding responsibility to rationalize their existence, downsizing may even reduce the air of tension and ill will that permeates public meetings throughout our region.

When town and village boards were first created in New York in the 1800s, they were envisioned as having three members. Early town boards were comprised of a supervisor and two town clerks. Two council members began to appear after the Civil War, and together with a supervisor they comprised a three-member board. All boards were that size until 1926, when Albany added two town justices to the board, thereby increasing its size to five.

Realizing that having an elected official discharge both judicial and legislative duties violated the U. S. Constitution, in 1976 the state removed justices from town and village boards, briefly returning them to their original three-member size.

And in 1932, New York quietly adopted a law that grants citizens the right to force public votes through petitions so that people, not politicians, can decide the size of town boards. In 1972, it added a law that permits citizens to petition to dissolve village governments as well.

### **Don't expect Albany to help**

After uncovering the 1932 petition law, I began organizing residents to collect the required number of signatures in every town and village. The strength of my idea derives from giving people a tangible tool with which to make their voice heard. And its power is its potential to not only reduce government, but also to restore our belief that

we can actually change something in our own community.

From the halls of Albany to our local town and village halls, politicians' refusal to change has never been more painfully illustrated than in our recent national recession. As jobs, pensions, education endowments, rainy day accounts and families' sense of security all burst in the bubble, local and state governments did nothing. Except maintain or increase taxes, fees and spending. An examination of where many local officials end up reveals why.

In the State Legislature, 61 percent of Assembly members and 69 percent of state senators are former local government officials. Today's Albany pols are yesterday's town board members. Local officials regularly remind them of that, and the fact that local politicians and their staffs form the bulk of state legislators' election workers. That's why just before adopting this year's budget a few weeks ago, Albany quietly removed a plan to create a uniform local government merger process.

The sole recourse is the American tradition of petitions and public referendum. As unaccountable as government is, by reinvigorating the referendum process we will reconnect private citizens with public decisions that affect their life.

Once we downsize local government, we will vest ourselves and our local servants with the moral authority to compel Albany to change, too. And in one fell swoop, we'll forever end the shell game of town governments complaining about school districts; county executives whining about state excess; and everyone lamenting public authorities.

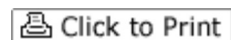
Ours is a wounded community. We bear the scars of decades of losses that have sapped our strength and our soul. Walking door to door these past months, speaking with folks from Amherst to West Seneca, I found the most striking aspect of local life to be its weariness. Throughout Western New York, the typical skepticism with which we Americans view government has risen to cynicism. And it's corroding our sense of community, and our sense of self.

"Though we are not now that strength which in old days moved heaven and earth," as Tennyson wrote, Western New Yorkers remain "one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will."

And while our local government may be out of breath, we have every right, and all ability, to breathe new life into it and ourselves.

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