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AMHERST

For fifth time, Amherst will debate downsizing

By Sandra Tan
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Downsizing, Round 5. In the wake of successful referendums to downsize the town boards of West Seneca and Evans, the Amherst Town Board will debate — for the fifth time since January 2008—a resolution to downsize its own board from seven members to five.

In many ways, today's debate is expected to mirror the debate from February, when a similar downsizing resolution was defeated in a 3-3 tie. The board has left one seat vacant since January.

Republican Council Members Shelly Schratz, Guy R. Marlette and Barry A. Weinstein are expected to vote in favor of downsizing, and Democratic Council Members Daniel J. Ward and Mark A. Manna are expected to vote against.

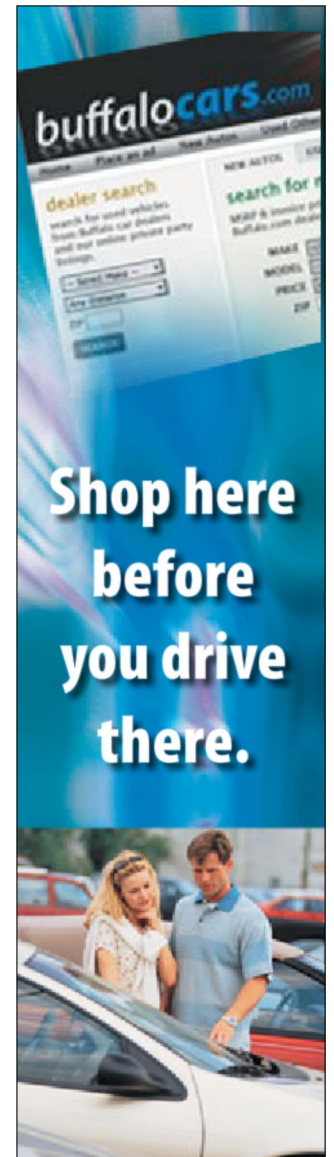
Supervisor Satish B. Mohan is also expected to vote against the resolution, which he describes as a red herring in the broader need to trim the number of town government employees who make an average of \$85,000 a year, including benefits.

As he did in February, however, Mohan said he may leverage his swing position to try and gain board support for other reforms he has unsuccessfully pushed during his tenure as supervisor. That could make today's discussions long and contentious.

Philosophically, Mohan said, downsizing town leadership remains a bad idea that should not be confused with the overall need to downsize government overall.

“We are thinning down the leadership, which is one big wing of the democratic government,” he said. “If the leadership is weak, then the people are not very well-represented.”

Less concentrated leadership, diversity of opinion and leadership accessibility remain important, Mohan said.



Schratz, the primary sponsor of the current downsizing resolution, responded that Mohan and others should recognize the need for the public to be heard, as they have been in Evans and West Seneca.

“It’s what the people want,” said Schratz, who will be leaving the Town Board at the end of the year and is a candidate for the Erie County Legislature’s 14th District seat. “I’ve heard more from people on this issue than any other issue this year.”

She added, “What are they afraid of? There’s no reason why you would be afraid to let the people who pay our paycheck tell us what they want.”

Marlette and Weinstein have co-sponsored the downsizing resolution.

Weinstein acknowledged that gaining a fourth vote in favor may not happen today but that if it doesn’t, he would make downsizing a priority if he’s elected to the town supervisor’s seat in November.

Weinstein’s Democratic opponent in the supervisor’s race is Alice J. Kryzan.

Marlette said he also supports downsizing, though he’s unwilling to entertain what he considers unreasonable demands by Mohan to gain the fourth vote needed to adopt the resolution.

“The residents I’ve spoken to, regardless of whether they support downsizing or not, they want the opportunity to vote on the matter,” he said. “That’s coming from somebody who’s not running for anything.”

Downsizing advocate Kevin P. Gaughan expressed a notable lack of optimism regarding the resolution’s passage, given that the same resolution has been defeated in various forms on four other occasions.

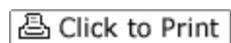
Gaughan said he plans to have enough petition signatures gathered in Amherst by the end of August to place the downsizing matter on the ballot for a referendum.

“Sooner or later, the Town of Amherst will have its say,” Gaughan said, “but I don’t think it’s because the Amherst Town Board voluntarily downsized its members.”

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