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Legislators again plan to consider downsizing

New proposal calls for cutting 4 seats

By Thomas J. Prohaska
NEWS NIAGARA REPORTER

LOCKPORT — Niagara County legislators appear serious about reducing their ranks.

For the second time in nine months, a resolution on the agenda of Tuesday's meeting calls for cutting the number of legislators to 15 from 19.

The move actually cannot be made without a referendum, County Attorney Claude A. Joerg said. Also, by state law, a county legislature can be redistricted only once per decade.

Since the district boundaries were redrawn after the 2000 federal census, the map could be redone, at the soonest, only after data comes in from next year's census. That should be in the spring of 2011.

Chairman William L. Ross said last week he wants to hold a referendum on a reduction during the election in November 2010. A new district map would be drawn up in time for the 2011 election.

He also said he wants to appoint a nine-member committee of legislators and citizens to grapple with the issue of the appropriate number of legislators, as well as whether terms should be extended from the current two years and whether to impose term limits.

"We're trying to balance the reduction in the size of government with our desire to maintain a part-time Legislature," said Majority Leader Richard E. Updegrove, RLockport.

Ross, C-Wheatfield, said he will refer the downsizing resolution to the Legislature's Administration Committee, where he will make a pitch June 23 for a special panel.

Ross' promise to appoint such a committee derailed a downsizing resolution introduced last September by

Legislators John D. Ceretto, R-Lewiston; Danny W. Sklarski, D-Town of Niagara; and Gerald K. Farnham, R-Lockport.

Tuesday's resolution has six co-sponsors: Ross, Ceretto, Updegrave and Legislators Paul B. Wojtaszek, R-North Tonawanda; Andrea L. McNulty, D-North Tonawanda; and Peter E. Smolinski, R-North Tonawanda.

Ross said inside discussions last fall convinced him to hold off on appointing the committee, but after recent votes to slice two members off the West Seneca and Evans town boards, the issue is hot.

"There is no formula for determining the optimum size for our elected bodies," Updegrave said. "The conversations have continued, but recent events in other municipalities have made this a timely resolution."

"We'll put some time in and make a good decision," Ross said. "This will be with us a long time. We haven't changed since the mid-'80s," when the Legislature was cut to 19 from 31 members.

Asked for a new number, Ross said, "I could live with 11; I could live with 15."

So could Minority Leader Dennis F. Virtuoso, D-Niagara Falls.

"I don't have a problem with it being reduced as long as the public understands they're going to have to maybe wait longer for a response to a problem," he said.

"Where it's going to hurt is the towns and villages more than anything. I know we're going to lose a seat in the city [of Niagara Falls], but that doesn't hurt as much. Some legislators might be representing as many as four towns."

Legislator Jason J. Murgia, D-Niagara Falls, chairman of the Administration Committee, said he would support a special committee only if it were ordered to recommend a reduction.

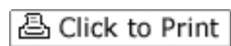
"Is it more symbolic than monetary? Yes, but we have to start somewhere," Murgia said.

County legislators are paid \$15,075 per year. The chairman receives an extra \$3,000, and the party leaders an additional \$500. The county also offers health insurance, which about half of the legislators take.

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