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Public input is invited on Erie County Legislature reform

By Matthew Spina
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

A special panel researching reforms to the Erie County Legislature will ask the public tonight for its suggestions.

Doors will open at 5:30 p. m. for a two-hour forum that begins at 6 in the WNED studios in Horizons Plaza, 140 Lower Terrace.

The 21st Century Commission, created by Legislature Chairwoman Lynn M. Marinelli, D-Town of Tonawanda, has been asked to review the size, powers, duties, structures and functions of the 15-member Legislature.

Marinelli decided to form the panel as civic activist Kevin P. Gaughan's movement to shrink the size of legislative bodies across Erie County picked up steam last summer.

Up to five county lawmakers were endorsing a smaller, nine-member Legislature, a proposed change that would go to the voters this November, when all 15 lawmakers are to stand for re-election.

Marinelli preferred that a special commission undertake a wider review of the Legislature's functions and the way its members will be elected in the next decade, as well as the basic question of how many members there should be. She envisioned a referendum, not this year, but in 2010.

However, after cranking to life months ago, the 21st Century Commission is, in fact, shooting for a referendum this election year. Its nine appointees are researching whether the Legislature should remain at 15 members or shrink in size; whether some lawmakers should be elected countywide; whether terms should remain at two years or go longer; and, if so, whether all members should stand for re-election in the same year or in alternating years.

Further, the panel has been asked to look at each legislator's "scope of responsibility," including "constituent service." Some legislators who defend the 15-member system say they are willing to represent any of the more



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than 60,000 citizens in their districts on problems involving county government.

Marinelli appointed six of the nine researchers on the panel. Two were appointed by two Democratic lawmakers from Buffalo, Majority Leader Maria R. Whyte and Government Affairs Committee Chairwoman Barbara Miller-Williams. The Republican leader, Legislator John J. Mills of Orchard Park, selected one member.

The commission's recommendations will not flow directly to the voters. They must first go through the Legislature, which would have to vote to change the County Charter or other county laws to conform to the suggestions.

In 2006, the Legislature's Democrats scrapped several recommendations they didn't like from the Charter Revision Commission and advanced only the ideas they favored.

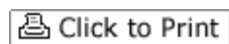
The 21st Century Commission has been interviewing lawmakers for their attitudes. Tonight's forum is designed to gauge public attitudes, and speakers will be given three minutes each.

People also can submit written comments. Citizens can register in advance through the e-mail of a legislative aide at furtney@erie.gov.

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