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Another Voice / Downsizing vote

Ronald Fraser: West Seneca and Evans are now laboratories

By Ronald Fraser

On June 3, the citizens of West Seneca and Evans voted to become government reform laboratories by reducing their elected town boards to three members from five starting in 2010.

In selling this change, downsizing guru Kevin Gaughan declared that a three-member board would set in motion a government reform revolution in Erie County and in Albany. "Downsizing local government will reap 10 benefits," Gaughan wrote in The Buffalo News. He said "will," not "maybe."

It is now up to the citizens of West Seneca and Evans to track Gaughan's promises to see if they take place. Other towns in Erie County should also wait to see if the citizens of West Seneca and Evans, five years from now, feel their towns are better run.

Here are Gaughan's 10 promised benefits and possible actions citizens can take in the coming years.

1. "Decrease property taxes on families and business." If property tax reduction is a sure thing with a three-person board, the idea will spread like wildfire. Citizens should compare their current and future tax bills to test this promise.
2. "Increase citizens' voice in their community." Citizens should be ready to answer this question: "Have the remaining three board members sought out and acted on my views?"
3. "Reduce the decibel level of politicians' endless squabbling." Listen closely to determine if three officials really squabble less than five.
4. "Expand funds for local services." Record all new local service enacted by the three-person board.



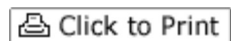
5. "Return town boards to their original size." Three elected officials may have been an ideal number in the 1800s. Ask yourself if, in a far more complex, modern town, five elected officials make sense.
6. "Create transparency, and change meetings from lectures to conversations." Attend monthly meetings to determine whether a conversational style is adopted by the three-person board.
7. "Provide the necessary first step in reforming state government." Ask your state representatives whether they have noticed the trickle-up government reform Gaughan promised.
8. "Align local government with institutions (hospitals, places of worship, companies) that have consolidated to adapt to population loss." Ask your pastor if he or she has a better working relationship with the town.
9. "Revive the role of public referendum in New York State." Keep track of how many other towns vote to downsize their boards.
10. "Restore our belief that we can change." Remember, not all change is for the better. There are unacknowledged downsides to these "benefits."

Citizens of West Seneca and Evans must decide if this downsizing was a good move. A less Pollyannaish approach to government reform would present a far more balanced view of the possible unintended consequences attached to the proposed changes.

Ronald Fraser serves on the Environmental Planning Board in Colden.

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