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Two towns may consider downsizing

Petitions filed in Evans, W. Seneca

By Janice L. Habuda NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Voters in the towns of Evans and West Seneca could get a chance this spring to decide whether to downsize their governments.

At an afternoon news conference in Cheektowaga, regionalism advocate and attorney Kevin P. Gaughan announced that petitions to hold referendums had been filed in Evans and West Seneca.

As a result, the clock is ticking to ensure the referendums are held this spring — between the last week of May and the first week of June. If approved by voters, the downsizing of those town boards, from four members to two, begins this year.

“No politician and no government can stop this movement now,” Gaughan said.

Last year’s effort to reduce the size of the West Seneca Town Board collapsed when the Appellate Division of State Supreme Court ruled the wording of the petition was “misleading” and would confuse voters.

From that experience, Gaughan said he learned how to craft a “judicially sanctioned” petition by asking the judge how to word it. “We said, ‘What should we do?’ ” Gaughan said.

To avoid challenges to the validity of signatures, Gaughan said volunteers who went door-to-door worked from the most recent voter registration lists available from the Erie County Board of Elections.

“I am fully confident that these petitions will withstand any assault,” he said.

There were 810 signatures required in the Town of West Seneca; Gaughan said 1,503 were collected. In Evans, the minimum requirement was 215; volunteers obtained 1,003.

“They can’t attack the language anymore, so they will try to throw the signatures out,” Gaughan said of opponents.

The downsizing effort in West Seneca was stymied by the three-member majority on the Town Board. Town Supervisor Wallace C. Piotrowski, who isn’t among them, welcomes the opportunity for residents to vote on the issue.

“Personally, I am in favor of reducing the size of government,” Piotrowski said Friday.

“My opinion is only one of 46,000 in this town,” he continued. “The ultimate decision is the voters’.”

That three-member majority has so far failed to follow through on last fall’s promise to schedule a referendum on downsizing for this spring, according to Piotrowski and Gaughan.

In the Town of Evans, Supervisor Francis J. Pordum previously had called Gaughan’s downsizing drive

“a very simplistic approach to savings in government.”

Friday, Pordum said: “The way you save money in government is by hard work, being creative, cooperation between and within departments in your government, and reducing wasteful spending.”

Pordum said he had heard that petitions were filed but hadn’t seen them.

“If people want less representatives, I’ll abide by that,” Pordum said.

Gaughan has preached downsizing all over Erie County in recent years. The first official convert, last fall, was the Village of Lancaster, where residents voted overwhelmingly in favor of downsizing from seven to five board members.

“All we are trying to do is . . . let people decide whether they want to reduce the size of government and save some taxes,” Gaughan said.

Erie County has 439 elected municipal officials. Gaughan said that by reducing the number by 90, the annual savings to taxpayers would be \$12 million.

Other targets in the immediate future include the Village of Blasdell, where Gaughan hopes residents will back a referendum on dissolving village government, and the towns of Amherst and Cheektowaga.

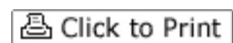
He also plans to push for a further reduction in the size of the Tonawanda Town Board, which was reduced by two — to four — in a 2006 referendum. Gaughan said it’s up to voters to decide.

“I don’t have to convince [town board members],” Gaughan said. “All we have to do is circulate petitions, collect signatures.”

jhabuda@buffnews.com

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