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Vince Sedlacek of West Seneca urges residents to vote against downsizing the Town Board to three members, from five.

Robert Kirkham / Buffalo News



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Voters downsize town boards in Evans and West Seneca

Downsizing backers see start of trend

By Mary B. Pasciak
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Residents in Evans and West Seneca voted overwhelmingly Wednesday to reduce the size of their town boards by two people.

This is just the start, downsizing supporters say. Plans are under way to put a similar measure on the ballot in November in Alden, Hamburg and Orchard Park, and volunteers are circulating petitions in a number of other towns, as well.

“Tonight marks the beginning of the end of the age of large local government in Western New York,” said Kevin Gaughan, the civic activist who spearheaded the petition drives that led to the referendums. “When our community is finally restored to its rightful place, I think history will record the first step taken back to our road to recovery was in West Seneca and Evans tonight.”

“We’ve got too much government. It costs too much money,” said John Haak, a retiree living in Evans who spent much of Wednesday urging people to vote yes on the downsizing. “This could be the thing that starts the snowball rolling.”

The votes mark the first time local residents have directly determined the number of local representatives they have on a town board.

People voted overwhelmingly in favor of downsizing in both towns, according to unofficial results. In West Seneca, the vote was 6,245 to 4,252. In Evans, it was 2,222 to 1,326.

Voter turnout was about 30 percent in both towns — lower than a November election but much higher than a school budget vote.

In Evans, where voter dissatisfaction was fueled by a recent revaluation, many residents interviewed Wednesday said they believe their town, one of the smallest in Erie County, does not need five representatives on the Town Board.

Steve and Colleen Bonnes, a young couple with a 2-month-old baby, were grateful for the chance to cut local government.

“It seems like there’s a lot of cronyism,” said Steve Bonnes, a maintenance worker.

Many voters in West Seneca said they weighed the financial savings against the cut in representation.

“I think we’ll still get fair representation,” said Theresa Lawson, a West Seneca resident who is a vice president at NYCE. “I’ve heard people say it’s not going to save that much money, but if you have that opinion about everything, nothing’s going to change. You have to start somewhere.”

Certainly, not everyone agreed.

“I think it’s a big mistake,” said Jane Ehmke, a resident of Evans since 1945. “I don’t want three people running the town — it’s not enough.”

Both towns have four board members and a supervisor, who also votes as a member of the town board. As of Jan. 1, each town will have two board members and a supervisor.

As a result of Wednesday's votes, the two board members' terms that are up at the end of the year will be phased out in each town.

In Evans, the seats held by Michael M. Spence and Karen C. Erickson will be eliminated. In West Seneca, those held by Vincent J. Graber Jr. and Christina Wleklinski Bove will be eliminated.

The downsizing will save taxpayers the salary and health benefits of the board members. West Seneca board members earn about \$22,400 a year, while those in Evans earn about \$15,000. None of the four board members who will lose their positions take health insurance from their town, but all receive a cash payment in lieu of the insurance.

The total savings for taxpayers in West Seneca would be about \$88,000 a year, if the full cost of health insurance is counted. In Evans, the total saving is somewhat less but is spread out among fewer taxpayers.

The owner of a home assessed at \$100,000 would save about the cost of a movie ticket in each town.

"I'm voting yes because this is such a poor area, and I think every little bit helps," said Julie John, who has lived in Evans more than 20 years.

Downsizing opponents were out in force at the five polling places in West Seneca. Volunteers said they tried to have at least two people at each site at all times.

About half a dozen residents in fluorescent green T-shirts saying, "Downsizing is wrongsizing," handed out pamphlets outside Winchester Community Church in the final hours of voting.

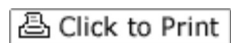
Supporters of the downsizing were less visible at the polling places in West Seneca, yet voters still decisively favored the measure.

"I think it affirms the sense that I had which drove me to do this, which is Western New Yorkers are yearning for any type of change," Gaughan said. "It was as if citizens were almost counting the days and hours when they could finally have their say."

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