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Voters have their say

Dissatisfaction, tax concerns downsize boards in Evans, West Seneca

Frustration boiled over in Evans and West Seneca. Overwhelming votes in each community to reduce the size of its town board are a measure of that, and just possibly a historic first step in the process of empowering residents long fed up with increasing taxes and politics.

The downsizing vote, pitched as a cost-saving measure but viewed in at least one of the towns as a referendum on politicians, also may open the door for a long-overdue consolidation of some of Erie County's astonishing number of governments and taxing jurisdictions.

The overwhelming vote in favor of downsizing both town boards—in West Seneca 6,245 to 4,252, and in Evans 2,222 to 1,326—should be enough to give opponents pause. And while 30 percent turnout in both towns is lower than that for a November election, it should be noted that it is much higher than usually seen in the more common stand-alone votes for school budgets and boards.

Residents voted dissatisfaction with increasing taxes and government costs. And they left no doubt.

In Evans, with a population of about 20,000, homeowners were rebelling against recent assessments many considered an unfair extra tax on citizens. Emerging from that dissatisfaction was a new taxpayer group and, it's safe to say, a volley aimed at the town leadership.

In West Seneca, with a population of about 46,000, the vote to downsize may have been more about politics and the ability of activists to find a political ally in West Seneca Supervisor Wallace C. Piotrowski, who took office in January 2008, although he has denied any political motivation.

Civic activist Kevin P. Gaughan earned a victory lap for the two votes. He and his volunteers have convinced residents that they can have some measure of control in setting the size and scope of their town and village governments. Using the referendum tool he uncovered, Gaughan remains determined to seek the same in all 25

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towns and 16 villages. Similar measures will appear on the ballot in November in Orchard Park, Hamburg and Alden.


However appealing the basic idea of returning government to the people, caution must be exercised in reducing town and village boards. Both Evans and West Seneca now have four board members and a supervisor, who also votes. As of Jan. 1, each town will have two board members and a supervisor.

This page shares the concerns of Kathryn A. Foster, director of the University at Buffalo's Regional Institute, and of Robert J. Freeman, executive director of the state's Committee on Open Government, that a three-member board could be handcuffed by Open Meetings Law provisions against a board majority—in this case, any two—discussing town business privately.

The results of the decision to downsize both governments will take time to materialize, but the message is clear: Voters are fed up and, given the chance, will show that they are not going to take it anymore.

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