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Turnover in local politics offers best of both worlds

Alan Morrell
Staff writer

As Irondequoit, Mendon, Penfield, Parma and Gates inaugurate new supervisors over this holiday weekend, some of those towns are more accustomed to turnover than others.

When Mary Joyce D'Aurizio, for instance, is sworn in Sunday, she'll be Irondequoit's 10th supervisor in 40 years. In Penfield, Tony LaFountain is the town's eighth different supervisor during the same timeframe, and John Moffitt became Mendon's fifth since 1995.

Conversely, Pittsford has had only five supervisors since 1943, Greece has had six in 49 years and Perinton, the local longevity champion, has had just four since 1935.

A number of factors can contribute to leadership turnover, such as changing population, political scandals, increasing crime, dissatisfaction with taxes and assessments, or just the politician's personality.

Determining what's better — longtime leadership or frequent change — is more difficult. On one hand, political analysts say, stability could lead to better long-term planning and stronger relationships with developers, which could result in economic growth and lower taxes.

The downfalls could be resistance to change, loss of fresh ideas and less involvement by residents who think their votes don't matter.

"There is no right or wrong," said Kate Foster, director of the University at Buffalo Regional Institute, a public policy and research center. "At the end of the day, you're trading off consistency and 'churn,' and both have positive and negative aspects."

Supervisors in Irondequoit, for instance, have bemoaned the difficulty in accomplishing major projects — such as a long-discussed new library, waterfront development and redevelopment of the Medley Centre mall — because of frequent turnover. Substantial change, they said, takes time, and new administrations typically need to learn the ins and outs of government work.

"Of course, you could say, nothing gets done, and that's *why* they keep voting them out," said Paul Ferber, chairman of Rochester Institute of Technology's political science department.

Irondequoit Supervisor Mary Ellen Heyman, who did not want to comment for this story, was voted out in November after four years in office. One factor in her defeat was the controversial senior center issue.

Heyman has said she was determined to find a new home for seniors and said previous administrations had been "paralyzed by inaction" after years of study. Heyman and board members voted to abandon the town-owned Pinegrove Avenue center and move to leased space on Kings Highway. Residents forced a public vote and overturned the decision.

Those events led to ever-increasing bitterness between some residents and Town Hall. Ferber said the Irondequoit administration misread a sensitive issue.

"Leadership is not simply mouthing back, 'Tell me what you want,'" he said. "But you can't always be telling people why they're wrong. You can't ignore what your constituents want."

Irondequoit instead chose to take a chance on political newcomer D'Aurizio, who said residents have been loud and clear about their frustration with high taxes.

"Other towns have had some commercial and economic bases that have been a stabilizing factor," she said, adding that Irondequoit's tax base has not been growing.

D'Aurizio said she plans to make difficult decisions and doesn't expect the so-called "honeymoon period" with new leadership to last long.

Chili Supervisor David Dunning, who was elected to his second two-year term in November, said sustained leadership has "immense value" to a town. He said developers have become increasingly interested in Chili, but that this interest frequently has not led to results.

"It hasn't had an opportunity to get a foothold because of the turnover," Dunning said. "You need that continuation to pursue the interests of the town."

Kent Gardner, president of the Center for Governmental Research, said salary is one issue in drawing strong candidates, and Irondequoit's is the lowest for full-time supervisors in Monroe County.

Heyman's salary was \$62,000 in 2009. The next-lowest, Chili, pays about \$78,000, and Greece, Perinton and Pittsford all pay their supervisors salaries of at least \$112,000.

"Towns with more longevity have better pay," Gardner said.

"You're more likely to attract career professionals. At the town level, some stability is critically important."

Supervisors in every local town serve two-year terms, except in Greece, where the term is four years. Some analysts and politicians said two years is too short, especially for newcomers who might spend the first year learning the ropes and the second year campaigning for re-election.

According to the Monroe County Board of Elections, Greece also is the only local town with term limits — three consecutive four-year terms for supervisors and 10 years for town board members. Due to a grandfather clause included when the legislation passed in 1999, Supervisor John Auberger started his fifth and likely final term Friday. His first two terms were two years apiece.

Gates Supervisor Ralph Esposito, who served for 20 years but decided not to run for re-election in 2009, said he favors term limits for federal and state officeholders, but not at the town level.

"You don't need them, when the public has a chance to see you every day," he said.

The bottom line, said Lise Bang-Jensen of the Albany-based Empire Center for New York State Policy, is that in a democracy, voters decide who they want in office.

"The public has made a choice," she said. "Obviously, the will of the people is important."

AMORRELL@DemocratandChronicle.com
