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CAYUGA COUNTY

## Expert discusses alternative forms of government, redistricting, with Cayuga County Legislature

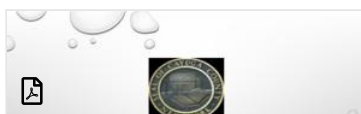
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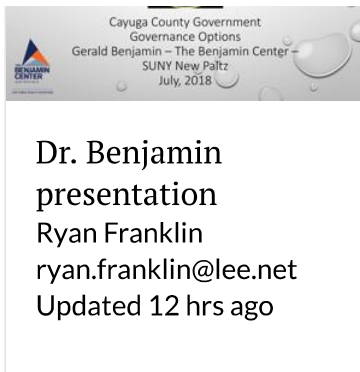


The first slide in a presentation by Dr. Gerald Benjamin to the Cayuga County Legislature on alternative forms of government, redistricting and reapportionment.

Provided photo



AUBURN — The Cayuga County Legislature



on Thursday heard from one of New York's leading experts on local government to hear his advice on possibly redistricting or adopting an alternative form of government.

Dr. Gerald Benjamin leads the eponymous Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, which focuses on research, evaluation and analysis of and for local governments to better serve citizens.

In addition to previously serving as a Legislature chairman, among other roles, in Ulster County, Benjamin led the development process for that county's first charter.

Forming a charter was one of the main topics Benjamin discussed Thursday evening, along with redistricting and weighted vote reapportionment.

Currently, the Cayuga County Legislature operates under what Benjamin called the "unusual if not unique" form of a county Legislature with weighted votes.

In Cayuga County, the legislators votes are weighted based on their district's population, which multiple legislators say results in a disproportionate sharing of power.

As part of the upcoming 10-year U.S. Census, the county will be required to reexamine the apportionment for its weighted votes based on population changes.

To illustrate, District 6 Legislator Aileen McNabb-Coleman, D-Sennett, has the most points at 22 and 86 for two-thirds and majority votes, respectively. Legislature Chairman Patrick Mahunik's, D-Auburn, District 12 in Auburn has the fewest, with 14 and 47 points.

Both Mahunik and McNabb-Coleman said they found the discussion Thursday to be enlightening and valuable and said it was important for the county to consider these changes even if it could result in their districts or points changing.

"We have to do what makes sense to even things out, but it would be difficult to erode those boundaries," McNabb-Coleman said, referring to the possibility of towns being split across redrawn districts.

For the most part, Benjamin said, only counties governed by a Board of Town Supervisors use weighted voting. Most counties instead use Legislatures with single or multi-member districts.

Benjamin explored the variety of advantages of a weighted voting system, such as maintaining already-established jurisdictional boundaries like towns and school districts, and disadvantages, like propensity for horse-trading politics and domination by established blocs.

In addition to the issues of reapportionment and resizing, Benjamin highlighted the pros and cons of different forms of executive government.

The forms Benjamin listed were: legislative chair acting as an administrator, a Legislature-appointed administrator, director or manager, or an elected "president" acting as the executive.

Cayuga County has a statutory system in which the legislature appoints an administrator who has limited delegated authorities. That role is currently held by J. Justin Woods.

Although the terms administrator, director and manager may all appear similar, Benjamin said it was important to note they had different roles and powers under state law.

Another option was for counties to develop their own charters, which effectively allows them more control to customize nearly all aspects of the form of government.

Legislator Chris Petrus, R-Brutus, said the Census presents the perfect opportunity to reconsider alternative forms of government given the county will already be required to look at apportionment.

Developing a new charter form of government would allow for the county to clearly enumerate the roles of the legislators and the administrator in order to streamline the process and avoid

arguments over responsibilities and authority, Petrus said.

"We can ensure the role of the new administrator while simultaneously preserving the power of the legislature," Petrus said of the flexibility afforded by customizing a charter.

Benjamin again highlighted the various strengths and weaknesses of different executive forms. An elected executive, for example, is often both familiar with the community and well-acquainted with the state political system, but have a tendency to lack the expertise of an administrator and can become entrenched in office.

In his own experience, Benjamin cited how the Ulster County executive, which he had helped draft the provisions for, had been very effective during the late 2000s financial crisis but now had a tendency to "dominate" the legislature.

While that was a potential weakness of the system, Benjamin said it was also a lesson for legislators in general, that officials had to understand how to behave effectively as a body and not think of themselves as a group of Republicans versus a group of Democrats in order to manage with an executive.

"It's a whole new game with new rules," Benjamin said.

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