

## **OCL Leadership Conference – May 17, 2006**

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### ***Presentation on Historical Perspectives on Local Government Structure***

#### **INTRODUCTION**

If this was the showroom at the Turning Stone Casino, and not the University Sheraton, you might say I'm the Warm-Up Act. Government re-structuring is a topic that some find tough to face with optimism. It often can generate negative reactions brought on by parochialism on one side and cynicism on the other. So my job is to help open your minds for the presentations and discussions that will follow. I will attempt that by showing, in a certain sense, we have **BEEN THERE AND DONE THAT** before. Circumstances and issues might have been different, but Onondaga County's citizens have been able to consolidate, modify, and re-structure local government in the past to meet changing needs. It has never been easy or unanimous, but it did happen.

#### **FORMATION OF ONONDAGA COUNTY**

We can actually go back over 200 years and find times when local government structure was not quite working out, and see where citizens stepped forward to provide leadership and change.

*1) As we look at some of the first settlers surveying land here around 1790, we can note that* Most of Central New York in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century fell mostly within Herkimer County. As the population increased here, so did the need to conduct a variety of legal business, court activity, land transactions, etc. at the county seat. For early settlers like Moses DeWitt, Comfort Tyler and the others living in this area, this meant an inconvenient 50-mile trip east to the Herkimer county seat at Whitesboro, near Utica. Fifty miles would be a good haul today on the Thruway but in 1794, such a trip could eat up a couple of days.

Another issue was a desperate need for basic public infrastructure.

*2) In this case, that meant roads.* Central New York was undeveloped in the sense of a Western economy. Roads brought in essential supplies and sent out products to market. And this area was literally sitting on a gold mine – a white gold mine - in the presence of natural brine springs, but this salt could only produce revenue if it could reach customers in the east. Roads also encouraged more settlement. The British, America's feared enemy at the time, still occupied forts at Niagara and Oswego. They posed a security threat, best countered by increasing America's population in upstate New York.

*3) In addition to the inconvenience of traveling to Whitesboro, area locals felt their concerns were not being heard in the distant county seat and state capital. And, in 1793, increased taxes to build a new courthouse at far off Whitesboro angered some. So in January of 1794, 133 settlers signed a petition to the legislature calling on the state to create a new county in the center of the state, depicted here in a later painting.*

With what would be seen as remarkable speed today, the state acted in just two months and on by March 5, 1794 Onondaga County was born.

Onondaga County was much larger then, almost 70 X 52 miles. about four times the size of the present county. It stretched from Oswego in the north, south all the way to embrace what are Ithaca and Cortland today. And to the west, it reached all the way to the head of Seneca Lake at Geneva. How is that for regional government?

But even at that size, Onondaga County was born out of a sense of bringing local government closer to the people. That's true, But the real motivations behind its formation were economic issues of that time. Area citizens wanted a government that could respond more effectively to those needs:

- their need for roads to market their products
- their need for increasing settlement, for security and economic expansion
- their need to stop wasting resources in making long, inefficient journeys to conduct business
- And their need to gain political clout with higher government authorities

In other words, government size and form were-structured in 1794 in response to the changing needs of Central New Yorkers.

4) Over time, as this 19<sup>th</sup> century map shows, Onondaga County was reduced piece by piece as adjacent counties like Oswego, Cortland and Cayuga were created, each reflecting their own process of shaping local government to their evolving needs and especially reflective of the time involved with overland travel in those days..

New York State utilized a colonial structure of having towns serve as the basic unit of government within counties. What is now Onondaga County, in 1794, was covered by only four towns: Manlius, Pompey, Marcellus and Lysander. They had limited responsibilities, at first, primarily for the property tax system, road building, schools, some judicial responsibilities, handling destitute residents and, very important at the time, maintaining a fenced in pound to temporarily house wandering animals like pigs, cows and sheep.

As parts of the county filled in with population early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the realities of difficult topographies and the long traveling distances in those days created a certain isolation of settlements. This naturally resulted in a desire by citizens to concentrate services.

5) Sometimes, the establishment of a second post office location in an older town might create a new focus and identity for a particular settlement. And that might eventually lead to sufficient civic pride to petition for creation of a new town centered around that settlement. As we look at this 1829 maps of Onondaga County, we see that is what happened, in part, in 1825 to create the Town of Lafayette from the western portions of the older town of Pompey. It was later written that the Lafayette town fathers did not wish to remain, *"a dependence of Pompey. A rude and barbarous corner."*

Not to pick on Lafayette, but as an example only, Lafayette was created in 1825 for reasons that were evident 180 years ago. And now we have 180 years of tradition and identity, which must be acknowledged and respected. But the issues facing the good residents of Lafayette when John Quincy Adams was president must differ somewhat from those of today.

### **PROVINCIAL POLITICS**

6) Villages, in turn, were a more geographically focused option for communities of a concentrated settlement. Towns in these first 19<sup>th</sup> century decades were primarily agricultural. But, soon, concentrations of settlers living around water mill sites, salt manufacturing activities and vital transportation crossroads led to additional communal needs, like a water supply, fire protection, or just sidewalks. Manlius Village was the first organized in Onondaga County in 1813, situated on an important turnpike. Eight other villages were organized in Onondaga County before the Civil War.

7) The salt makers gathered at three separate points around Onondaga Lake eventually organized three separate villages to meet their needs at the time: these were the villages of Salina, Liverpool and Geddes. This 1810 map shows the initial layout for Salina, today's the far north side of Syracuse.

8) The Erie Canal crossing of the Genesee Turnpike led to the organization of another nearby village in 1825 named Syracuse. These 4 communities were literally minutes apart in today's automobile travel time but much more physically separate in the years before the Civil War.

9) Immediately north of Syracuse was its rival, the village of Salina. Salina was focused on salt making and related necessities like coopering. In addition to its own village officials, Salina had its own commercial district centered along Wolf Street. It had its own churches, bank, cemetery and residential neighborhood.

The two villages were linked by Salina Street and the parallel Oswego Canal. But between them was an undistinguished expanse in the 1830s and 40s, an area occupied by buildings that were described at the time as, . . .

*“ . . .of the poorer class, generally the homes of coopers, whose unattractive shops with the litter of hoops and staves, lined the streets. On the west the smoke from the salt blocks filled the air, while to the east arose abrupt hills, with deep gorges between them. Not a sidewalk in any direction was laid and in rainy weather the mud seemed to be without bottom.”*

This was an unlikely place to build a new courthouse, but that was exactly what happened in 1830. The rivalry between these two villages resulted in a decision that proved a poor choice. Politics is all about compromise, but some compromises can have results that offend everyone, especially if the decision is not based on what is best for the long term but what is politically expedient at the moment. This is not just a contemporary problem. It haunted our ancestors almost two centuries ago.

The original Onondaga County courthouse had been built on Onondaga Hill, well before the era of canals, when Onondaga Hill had good turnpike connections. By the late 1820s, the old Onondaga Hill facility was tired and its site no longer the center of growth and commercial activity.

10) Syracuse leaders, empowered by their village's location on the marvelous Erie canal and led by the politically savvy Moses DeWitt Burnet and his real estate interests, convinced the state to authorize a new county courthouse.

The County Board of Supervisors was to select the site. So Syracuse sweetened the pot by offering free land and other cash incentives. Imagine! Using financial gimmicks to influence politicians? Well, Syracuse thought it had a lock on the final choice. But Salina village, with population and business comparable to Syracuse, did not want to surrender this new advantage to its rival.

11) A courthouse meant law offices, visitors, taverns, inns, the bustling kind of economic activity we see in this period print. It also meant prestige. So a clever argument was advanced by Salina officials. They wondered, ironically, if the two villages might eventually merge someday and so county offices would, therefore, need to be centralized. That carried the day. Salina's misleading argument did not gain the courthouse for the center of Salina but was primarily aimed at preventing it from going to Syracuse.

12) A site midway along Salina Street, at the intersection with the aptly named Division Street, became home to the new brick county courthouse in 1830. Nobody, however, appreciated the location, inconvenient and far removed from the business centers of either place. The courthouse became neither a shining symbol of a progressive community nor a generator of additional economic prowess, but instead, a scorned marker for shortsighted politics.

One can certainly think of parallels today, where various local municipalities debate the best location for necessary public facilities, be they sewage treatment stations, baseball stadiums or even town halls.

### **CONSOLIDATION -19TH CENTURY STYLE**

So Syracuse and Salina grew up side by side but with this fierce rivalry. The competition evidenced in the courthouse skirmish was genuine. It was part civic pride, part narrow economic self-interest and, sometimes, just an excuse to launch a rowdy debate.

13) One got out of hand on January 1, 1844 when a gang of Salina salt boilers and some Syracuse ruffians engaged in a major brawl at Warren and Washington Street. This is a period image of local salt boilers. If you saw the movie, *The Gangs of New York*, I think you'll find these guys fit the bill. Well, the militia was needed to regain control of what came to be known as Cook's Coffee House riot. It dramatized to many of the prominent men in the community that a single, unified municipality would be more progressive and prosperous than two distracted with petty rivalries.

But the task of making one city from two rival communities would not be easy. At first, many Syracuseans saw no need to include Salina. They felt that the village of Syracuse, alone, had enough of a population to become a city on its own. Some still wanted the courthouse to move closer to Clinton Square, and felt including Salina would prevent that. So the effort to merge the separate villages of Syracuse and Salina into one city was a long, difficult process.

14) Wealthy local businessmen and real estate owners, men with a lot at stake in the community, took the lead to formulate the plans for a city charter, men like Elias Leavenworth that we see here. Leavenworth was a trustee of the village of Syracuse board and would serve as the city's 2<sup>nd</sup> mayor. The charter details were worked out at countless, often animated and emotional meetings held over several months. But always there were these visionary leaders who saw the fundamental point -- - that this area held great promise, but moving forward to tackle the issues that would propel the area to greatness required a common vision. Fighting each other over these challenges only wasted energy and caused delays.

15) Getting a handle on the final boundaries proved tricky. Some, like Harvey Baldwin thought Geddes and Liverpool should be included. And there was sentiment in each of those places to become part of Syracuse. Baldwin gave an impassioned speech at one meeting where he projected his image of this community fifty years in the future: a single city wrapped completely around Onondaga Lake, ornamented with graceful homes and hanging gardens and a population of 100,000.

But many could not embrace Harvey's broad vision. He was mocked by some who said if he wanted to make a city that big, why didn't he go all the way out to include the Cicero swamp while he's at it! In the end, Harvey did not get his metropolitan dream but his speech did motivate some doubters to see the wisdom of at least including the village of Salina with Syracuse.

16) The breakthrough came in February of 1847 when the final boundaries, arrangement of the wards and various assurances to the village of Salina were agreed upon. This map shows the layout of those first four wards. In addition to being designated THE FIRST WARD, Salina wanted a guarantee that it would keep its bank, post office and the headquarters of the salt superintendent. The charter request was submitted to the state for approval. That was gained in December but it required a referendum in the two villages. There were still many uncomfortable with the concept, but advocates lobbied hard. The formal reasons were presented in a December 1847 pamphlet. Some resonate in 21st century ears.

1. Secure better representation in the County's legislative body, the Board of Supervisors, especially to resist what was felt to be "unreasonable" county taxation forced on Syracuse by surrounding towns.

*[The village of Syracuse was part of the Town of Salina and the whole town had only one representative. Under the new city charter, Syracuse would have four of its own.]*

2. Provide the ability to organize a more effective, professional police force.
3. Create an elected Common Council with the authority to raise money in a responsible manner for municipal expenses, instead of needing to hold inefficient and sometimes emotional meetings of the residents to authorize budgets. *[By 1848, the village of Syracuse had a population of nearly 11,000.]*
4. Improve statewide name recognition for Syracuse to increase the city's chances to become a new state capital.
5. Increase efficiency of local government by consolidating two sets of village officers into a single set of city officials.
6. Allow municipal taxation of the extensive solar salt works inside Syracuse that were exempt under the village charter.

The public referendum was held on January 3, 1848. The totals were 1,457 in favor and 810 against. Certainly not unanimous, but successful by almost a 2:1 margin. On March 9, the election of the first city officers was certified and Mayor Harvey Baldwin set about organizing America's newest city.

In examining the six reasons given in favor of the merger, we see that achieving some savings by consolidating two staffs was only one justification. The other reasons really had more to do with achieving

- economic development,
- a more balanced voice in the county legislature,
- more effective taxation policies

Citizens of our community not only saw the broad advantages of government consolidation over 150 years ago, they actually made it happen. The issues may be different today, but we must consider that such change has happened before.

### **FURTHER CONSOLIDATIONS**

17) This merger would not be Syracuse's last. Here we see a view inside the old village of Geddes, at the intersection of what today is West Genesee Street and Erie Boulevard. In 1887, the village of Geddes did finally join the city, forty years after it was first considered. The old village of Geddes became Syracuse's far west side neighborhood, the area beyond Geddes Street that also includes the Tipperary Hill section. Also that year, the Town of Onondaga's Danforth village was annexed to Syracuse. It was centered around South Salina and Kennedy Streets.

Danforth, was an early “suburb” of Syracuse, developing as a residential district and linked with the city’s business center by horse-drawn streetcars. As Danforth’s population grew, and more and more homes lined its streets, it faced municipal issues of providing adequate school facilities, and decent fire and police protection. Rather than trying to develop those resources on their limited tax base, they opted to join adjacent Syracuse and take advantage of the systems that the city already had in place.

The village of Geddes had similar issues. Some period newspaper stories give the flavor of the times: One Geddes citizen was quoted as follows:

*“I tell you we want to go into the city for police protection, if nothing more. Its come to a pretty pass if a policeman can’t arrest a tough with being clubbed to death. This town will soon be run by toughs. What we want here is uniformed policemen.”*

Another, after saying he favored annexation, tempered it with the following reality:

*“The fact of the matter is that this town and Danforth are governed by a set of old fogies who like the prominence they get from such offices as village trustee, highway commissioners, clerks, collectors, etc. and they control the vote. If the annexation took place of course, these offices would be abolished and the glory of the holders of them would be gone.”*

(Well, thank goodness we don’t have to worry about such vanities today!)

There was some opposition in those villages to annexation. A lot of times it dealt with concerns over differing taxing rates or assuming responsibilities for the city’s existing bonded debt. But, essentially, the annexations occurred because people saw more good, in the long run, being part of a greater whole than forging their own way in the future.

18) As Syracuse approached the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was obvious that the citizens of other villages along its outskirts were economically or socially linked to the city by a well developed electric streetcar transit system. Such communities included the Town of Onondaga’s Elmwood and Valley sections; the Eastwood and East Syracuse villages in DeWitt and Solvay in the Town of Geddes.

Meanwhile, Syracuse City officials were warily watching places like Rochester and Buffalo growing by leaps and bounds. They saw continued annexation as a way to grow Syracuse’s population and value, enhancing it as a political and economic force within New York State. Opinions of the village residents, themselves, varied however.

19) While there was some sentiment to remain separate, the city’s professional fire and police departments were appealing assets . . .

20) . . . along with its expansive school system

21) And after 1894, Syracuse had a magnificent municipal water system, tied to Skaneateles Lake, and it had a sewer system. Both were attractions for villages without such features.

22) Some of the opposition to annexation did not surface just within the villages. One 1893 newspaper story implied some reluctance also existed in the state legislature, which had to authorize such local government mergers. It seems that the residents of one proposed area to join Syracuse were overwhelming registered as Republican voters. The state legislature, at the time, was controlled by the Democratic Party. Democrats in Albany were concerned about adding a bunch of Republican voters to Syracuse's roles. One state legislator even went so far as to suggest to the reporter that,

*"the interests of the Democratic Party were greater than those of the city."*

The role that politics has and will play in any government restructuring has always got to be a consideration.

23) Nevertheless, annexations continued for the next 30 years. Elmwood was annexed in 1899. Eastwood joined the city in 1926 and the Valley followed in 1927.

24) One of the Valley's primary motivations was a desperate need for better fire protection. They either had to form their own fire department or join the city to take advantage of its *"Large and well equipped department."* But the extended debate over which to do was just holding them back as a community. They were not solving their fire protection need and it came to a head when the Onondaga Valley Academy burned to the ground in 1919.

Well all these additions augmented the city's population which jumped to over 209,000 by 1930. East Syracuse and Solvay never opted to join, in part because they had already developed more mature municipal services and saw little immediate advantages.

### **LOCAL GOVERNMENT CHANGES ITS STRIPES**

The roaring Twenties came to a crashing halt in 1929 when the Stock Market hit the wall and collapsed that October. As the economy tanked around the country and in Central NY, most talk of government consolidation was put aside as everyone struggled with just survival. Then World War II followed and priorities were shifted to the war effort.

25) But the Post War years brought the promise of a modern era of prosperity and local citizens finally could focus on their future. They discovered, however, that the local ground rules were changing. Syracuse's population had peaked and was now starting to decline in the 1950s . . . slowly, but down for the first time ever in its 150 years. And the population in the surrounding towns was booming,

26) aided by a federally funded highway system that made it easy to commute from places like Cicero to downtown.

27) Jobs were locating in the suburbs too. The Post War manufacturers, like Carrier and GE were in out in the towns, in efficient Industrial Parks, abandoning the old 19<sup>th</sup> century brick factories of the inner city. These changes were causing increasing concern about solving new problems facing Onondaga County. One writer suggested the following:

*“These problems will not be solved or ameliorated by ignoring them. We must eliminate duplication of services and spread the cost more fairly. Metropolitan problems cannot be solved with the city, towns, villages and county working at cross purposes.”*

It could be a quote from this year’s OCL Study. But, actually it is lifted from a local newspaper story that appeared on October 9 of 1955, 51-years ago!

28) In 1955, the *Syracuse Herald Journal* ran an 8-part series on the metropolitan problems faced by Syracuse and its suburbs, given these new paradigms. It talked of traffic issues and “decentralization” (or what we would call sprawl today) and how that was leading to spreading slums in the city while demand for new service levels was escalating in surrounding towns. And intuitively, it noted that suburbs couldn’t exist without a healthy central city.

Let me read one excerpt:

*“The automobile, for all practical purposes erased boundary lines between the city and its suburbs. Despite the great interdependence of the city and its environs, as far as government is concerned, boundary lines are as inflexible as the walls which surrounded European cities in the medieval ages.”*

It went on to say:

*“There is need for cooperation and area-wide planning to solve the mutual problems of the city and its suburbs.”*

As the series pointed out, the issues by the mid-1950s were broader in scope than just securing better fire protection for a village or figuring out where to build the county courthouse. It was about metropolitan progress for all. As the series examined these concerns, it did raise awareness on one particular issue:

29) The antiquated form of the closest thing this area had for a metropolitan structure, namely – county government. Formed in 1794, county government functioned with an outdated system lacking any effective executive branch. The Board of Supervisors, with representation from 19 city wards and as many county towns, fulfilled both legislative and administrative functions. The newspaper compared it to a corporate board of directors without a president. Yet the community had new needs, beyond the ability of towns and the shrinking tax base of Syracuse to meet.

The *Herald-Journal* series pointed out that these needs related to community health care, public works, water, social services, and a comprehensive land use and zoning plan. It also wondered out loud if the zoo, the airport, city & county parks, various police departments, construction of local government office buildings, property tax assessment, and various purchasing departments might be consolidated under a restructured Onondaga County government, especially by the creation of an executive branch.

The community did rise to these challenges a few years later when Onondaga County voters finally adopted a critical new charter in 1961 and got their first county executive, John Mulroy. The charter did not call for the elimination of any local government, but was nonetheless a significant restructuring for delivering regional services. And it was sold to the electorate through careful planning and leadership.

Mulroy liked to quip that his goal was to drag the county into the 20th century. Under the new executive structure, shaped by Mulroy, Onondaga County was able to make considerable progress in many of the areas pointed out by the 1955 newspaper series. And although not a metropolitan government, the county relieved the city of responsibilities that it could no longer handle financially. For example, in 1975, it took over MacArthur stadium, upgraded it and then completely replaced it with Alliance Stadium in 1997. In 1975, the county also created a new library system, acquiring operation of former city libraries and managing shared functions with town libraries. And in 1979, county parks assumed responsibility for the city's decaying Burnet Park Zoo. After a \$12 million refurbishing, it reopened in 1986 to rave reviews.

30) But some of the issues raised in the 1955 series still resound as problems today, virtually untouched in half a century, and in some cases, even more problematic today: One being the fractured and counter-productive approach to land use planning that is emphasized in our current OCL Study.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is important to note the areas where there has been progress in re-structuring local government functions. And others where cooperative ventures assure the efficient delivery of specific activities, like the 911 emergency call center.

But compared with other parts of the nation, in fact many parts of the nation, Central New York faces some major economic challenges. As local citizens realized in the past, an outdated structure for local government can become a hindrance in meeting such challenges. Re-shaping those units, whether in 1794, 1899 or 1961 provided a whole new strategy for successfully tackling the future.

The Onondaga Citizens League study strongly suggests we are at one of those moments, today, where new civic strategies are needed. Looking back, we know it can happen.

**DJC/5.17.06**