

Signing up for self-promotion

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It's a time-honored practice for elected officials to put their names on signs marking publicly owned property -- parks, golf courses, beaches, marinas and the main thoroughfares leading into their municipalities.

So when eight new town supervisors and a new Erie County executive took office Jan. 1, it seemed crews in those communities had a bushel of signs to paint over or switch out.

But this year, two supervisors are balking at this taxpayer-subsidized self-promotion.

"I just think it's the symbolism that bothered me. It almost seems like these people with their big egos, and they want to put their name on everything," said Lancaster Supervisor Dino J. Fudoli, who didn't single out an offender. "And it's not theirs -- it doesn't belong to them."

Fudoli and Mary S. Cooke, the new Grand Island supervisor, say they won't put their names on signs marking town property.

Four other towns don't post names of elected officials on their signs.

"We don't waste money on that," said Margaret Orrange, the North Collins town clerk.

This leaves Clarence and Evans, as well as Erie County, updating their signs to replace the names of outgoing officials with their successors' monikers.

The cost isn't high, and these naming rights provide supervisors, mayors and county executives with a boost to their brands -- and their egos.

But none of the officials signing up for this custom expressed much enthusiasm for it.

"I think it's a little pompous," said David C. Hartzell Jr., the new Clarence supervisor, who added that, if it were up to him, he wouldn't have his name on any signs around the town.

This is an age-old tradition that amounts to some free publicity for officeholders.

"There's no question, it's really a form of advertising. It's a way for the elected official to get greater name recognition, at a time they're not campaigning," said Bob Davis, president of the Partnership Ltd. ad agency and former chairman of the Erie County Republican Party.

The names typically go up on property associated with positive feelings -- such as parks or beaches -- and not parking-enforcement vehicles or sewer and water bills.

Buffalo Mayor Byron W. Brown drew some criticism from firefighters last fall after they found his name emblazoned on eight new firetrucks.

Previously, only firefighters who died in the line of duty had their names placed on city fire trucks, and Brown's name was removed following some bad publicity. But he still has his name on dozens of office entrances, banners on light poles and other spots around Buffalo.

"Byron is the expert -- I kneel at his feet," said Hartzell, a Republican, referring to the Democratic mayor.

Erie County has 23 signs at its parks and Grover Cleveland and Elma Meadows golf courses that bear the name of the county executive -- Mark C. Poloncarz.

The Town of Evans has signs with officials' names at four locations: Sturgeon Point Marina, Evans Town Park, the Senior Center and the Town Hall.

Keith E. Dash, the new Evans supervisor, said having names on the signs could be helpful if residents are wondering who to contact if they have a question about town affairs.

"They're where the public assembles," Dash said.

At the Senior Center and the Town Hall, changing the names means switching around some letters on a bulletin board. At the marina and the town park, the names are stenciled on the signs, Dash said.

The cost of updating these signs is minimal, with Hartzell saying Clarence will pay a modest amount -- \$9.51, he guessed -- to put his name on six signs in Meadowlakes Park and elsewhere in the town.

Hartzell joked that he's going to put up billboards around town with his picture and name on them. Asked if they would look like the ubiquitous ads for two personal-injury lawyers, he continued the jest.

"Exactly, but I have more hair," he replied.

For Erie County, Robert Dececco handles the signs as an employee in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry.

Sections of wood with the name of the county executive and the department's commissioner hang on hooks from the permanent sign that states the name of the county property.

When new people take those positions, Dececco gets wood from the forestry division, routs the letters of the officials' names and titles into it, paints it and then switches out the old piece of wood for the new one.

The cost for doing this work is about \$3,000, said Peter Anderson, a spokesman for County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz.

"That is done at the behest of the parks department," Anderson said. "That is not like a county executive's directive, to do that sort of thing."

Of course, Poloncarz makes the appointments at the Parks Department.

While the sign-naming is a tradition in some places, West Seneca and other communities don't customarily put an official's name on town property.

"We don't have that type of glamour," quipped West Seneca Supervisor Sheila M. Meegan.

A sign at the entrance to Veterans Memorial Park states, simply, "Town of West Seneca Veterans Memorial Park."

West Seneca is looking to replace some of its signs around town, but any new markers would carry the names of company sponsors, not elected officials, Meegan said.

Three of the least-populated towns that saw a change in administration in the new year -- Alden, Collins and North Collins -- also don't put officials' names on their signs.

"When I look at this, I say, 'What a waste,'" said Orrange, the North Collins town clerk.

She said the town ordered two new name plates, one for the door to the supervisor's office and one for the dais in the Town Board's meeting room, for new Supervisor Rosaline A. Seege.

Combined with two vinyl signs for elsewhere in Town Hall, the total cost to the town was about \$50, Orrange said.

It's not the money they're worried about, Orrange and other critics said, but it's the principle of not using taxpayer money to boost their name recognition.

Cooke is still annoyed that the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation directed the Town of Grand Island to put up a \$117 sign at Veterans Park, where state grants paid for some improvements.

The sign, attached to the backstop at a park ball field, credits the state Environmental Protection Fund and names Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, office Commissioner Rose Harvey and former Supervisor Peter A. McMahon.

"Those are a complete waste," Cooke said. "I'm not going to pay \$117 [to put up a new sign]. I'm fine with it."

Fudoli, the Lancaster supervisor, emphasized his objection to this practice in a meeting with Carmen Ciccarelli, an employee in the town's Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry.

"That's something that he wants -- he's the boss," said Terrence D. McCracken, the department's general crew chief.

McCracken said he'll have to talk to members of the Town Board, whose names also appear on town signs, to see how they want to proceed. There are four town parks, with one or two such signs at each park.

A sign at the entrance to Westwood Park, explaining the park's rules and regulations, has the names of McCracken and four current and former Town Board members.

The word "supervisor" remains on the sign, but the space underneath is now blank.

Fudoli's objection to this form of sign language applies to signs on four wheels, too.

The Lancaster Senior Center has two vans used to shuttle seniors to medical appointments, grocery stores and other places.

The van provided by the county carries the name of former County Executive Chris Collins, while the town-owned van has the names of former Supervisor Robert H. Giza and former County Legislator Kathy Konst.

The two vans will continue to carry the names of former elected officials.

Looking to the future, Fudoli wants to put a statement along these lines on town signs: "This park was paid for and is owned by the residents of Lancaster."

Why?

"No politician would ever want to come in and take something like that down," he said.