

Prosecutor: Layoffs, budget cuts don't justify keeping 15 Saginaw County commissioners

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By **Barrie Barber | The Saginaw News**

SAGINAW — A decade of layoffs and deep budget cuts can't justify keeping a 15-member Saginaw County Board of Commissioners, a veteran county official says.

Prosecutor Michael D. Thomas, whose office has lost three assistant prosecutors, an investigator and a clerk to layoffs in the past decade, said commissioners should see their ranks reduced by two-thirds, to five commissioners.

"If there isn't enough money to sustain full-time employees ... I don't see where there's enough money to consider more than the bare minimum" of commissioners, he said.

Thomas made his remarks Monday to the County Apportionment Commission, a five-member panel that meets once a decade to draw the district boundaries for the County Board of Commissioners.

Last week, County Commissioner Tim Kelly, R-Saginaw Township, urged the Board of Commissioners to make the same recommendation to the Apportionment Commission on the number of districts. Kelly's plea failed in a 9-5 vote.

Today, one commissioner represents about 14,000 residents. Under Thomas's or Kelly's proposal, the ratio would rise to one commissioner per 40,000 residents.

"I just do not understand why a commissioner cannot represent one-fifth as many constituents as I have to represent as an elected official," said Thomas, D-Tittabawassee Township.

Under state law, the county may have five to 21 commissioners. The average for similar-sized communities ranks around 11, according to County Controller and Chief Administrative Officer Marc A. McGill.

The county this year budgeted \$322,000 to cover the salaries, meeting per diems and fringe benefits of the 15-member board, or an average of \$21,500 each. Cutting the board to five part-time commissioners would cost taxpayers a total of \$67,500, or \$13,500 individually, McGill calculated.

A big reason for the lower bill: No fringe benefits. Commissioners voted this year to abolish those perks for the part-time post, effective Jan. 1, 2013, the next two-year term. Commissioners elected since 2008 already have had their benefits eliminated.

In addition to more than 100 Saginaw County government jobs cut since 2001, Thomas said most employees have gone without raises for years, and the county faces a potential \$1.4 million loss in state revenue sharing under Republican Gov. Rick Snyder's budget proposal. Next Tuesday, voters will decide a 1-mill sheriff's service tax, the rejection of which would mean the loss of nine road patrol deputies, elimination of a six-person detectives bureau and shutting 160 beds at the county jail. That would mean the loss of 20 full-time corrections officers, authorities said.

Thomas' criticisms weren't supported by everyone. "We can't blame the commissioners for the lack of revenue we have," countered Treasurer Marvin D. Hare, D-Saginaw Township and a fellow apportionment committee member. "We have to blame the economy."

The five-member apportionment board will reconvene 9 a.m. May 13 in the lower level of the County Government Center, 111 S. Michigan.

The Bay County Apportionment Commission will meet at 9 a.m. today in the Commission Chambers of the Bay County Building, 515 Center, Bay City. The commission may discuss plans for new boundaries for the Bay County Board of Commissioners, but final action is not expected at this meeting.