

## Open government group gives failing grades to most Niagara County municipalities

### REPORT: Open government group gives failing grades to most municipalities.

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Nearly all of Niagara County cities, towns and villages should be wearing dunce caps, according to a local government watchdog group.

Of the 16 Western New York municipalities evaluated in a report published earlier this week by the Buffalo Niagara Coalition for Open Government, 14 of them failed when graded A to F. Even the passing grades — given to the Town of Amherst and the Town of Wheatfield — were a mediocre C+.

Failing grades were given to the cities of North Tonawanda, Niagara Falls and Lockport and the Towns of Lewiston and Lockport as well as the Village of Lewiston. It wasn't even close. The metro areas all scored below 60 points — a failure by even the most liberal classroom standards.

Niagara County government at large got an "F" as well, receiving a score of 51 out of 100, the same grade the legislature received two years ago with Niagara Falls and its city school district, when they were evaluated by the Empire Center for Public Policy, an Albany think tank.

In a weird coincidence, the Empire Center's statewide report was delivered a week after a hyperlink on the Falls website was co-opted by a pornographic materials publisher from a foreign country.

The Buffalo Niagara Coalition is led by attorney Paul Wolf, who said the 100-point, 10-criteria rubric the municipalities were graded on is "ground floor, basic stuff" prescribed by the state's Open Meetings Law.

In its criteria, the coalition's report surveyed the governments' websites to determine whether budgets, meeting minutes, agendas, and materials were archived for five years; contact information was provided for both elected and appointed officials; Freedom of Information Act forms were available with instructions; videos of meetings were posted online and whether financial disclosure forms for politicians were accessible, among other criteria.

Wolf said Niagara County is unique in some of its deficiencies, for instance a local law in the Niagara County Legislature that "prohibits citizens from being able to view county legislator disclosure forms" Wolf said it could state any potential conflict of interests in their political pursuits.

"There's nothing like that (law) in Erie County," he said.

Wolf said it was also "shocking" to see that the legislature did not make summaries of its meeting discussions, called minutes, available online.

"Niagara County didn't even post meeting minutes at all until we started doing this evaluation," he said.

"Your average block club does meeting minutes," Wolf continued. "Every small town and village was posting meeting minutes."

There is some attempt to change things in the Falls, according to City Administrator Nick Melson, who since his hire last year has been tasked with updating the city's website. Its gone through some changes, but still remains unorganized in areas and difficult to navigate.

The report criticized the city for being inconsistent in its budget archive, for not making Freedom of Information Act requests accessible through the website and for not posting financial disclosures for its officials.

Melson said posting disclosure forms and budget reports, quarterly updates that track spending by budget line, have "been talked about." A decade worth of meeting minutes, agenda items and votes are available through the Falls website, but it lacks supporting documentation for them, such as photocopies of actual contracts.

Melson said city officials have aspirations to update its entire technology infrastructure, installing what he called a "Citistat" model, a software provider that describes its product as a "data-driven management system designed to monitor and improve the performance of city departments in realtime."

That will encompass different components than the ones evaluated in Wolf's report, but could correct some of his group's criticisms. For instance, Citistat would enable digital notifications for residents on developments, like meetings or public hearings, as well as create a submission form for citizens seeking information or documents.

Wolf said he and his volunteer group of concerned residents whom compiled the study are "more than willing to work with local governments to help them make some of these changes." He has already heard from the Erie County Legislature and the city of Buffalo, he said.

Wolf's group also works with citizens. It holds meetings on the last Tuesday of the month at 5:30 p.m. in either the Williamsville Library or the Williamsville Village Hall. More information can be found at [www.nyopengov.org](http://www.nyopengov.org).