

And here we were thinking all along those “Welcome to Cheekto-Vegas” signs were simply a way to poke a little fun at our suburban neighbors.

One way or another – if they choose to stay steady in what will ultimately be a battle of nerves and stubbornness more than a legal fight – the Seneca Nation of Indians will build its Cheektowaga palace simply because there is no body, or no thing, which ultimately has the position of power to stop them.

Anthony Masiello? Hardly. The esteemed mayor himself has even given up the pretense of ancillary development of a casino site as a reason to open, astonishingly, Buffalo Niagara’s 10th gambling hall. “The City of Buffalo desperately needs the revenue the casino would generate” he blithely blurted to the Native American Times recently.

Maybe he too got a look at the most recent empirical data generated right in his back yard. In 1999, the Niagara Falls hotel occupancy rate was over 52 percent. Last year, the first full year of Seneca casino operations there, it was 43.8 percent. Three months ago, a grand total of four out of every five Niagara Falls, N.Y., hotel rooms were empty. Gamblers don’t leave casinos in search of a Jacuzzi spa and mint on the pillow after a draining day of dice and dealers. Most leave because they’re out of money. Why is that so hard to understand?

Joel Giambra? Nope. Giambra has been supportive of making sure it winds up in Buffalo, if indeed a casino is forced here under his watch, but there are far too many other massive issues swirling about the Rath Building to think the county executive would drop those to spend inordinate amounts of money and time to get in the middle of a squabble he’s lukewarm about in the first place.

George Pataki? Not in a New York second. Pataki – unless he’s privately pulling a lot of strings, but that seems unlikely – has become a perpetual sideline sitter when it comes to the Senecas. His idle threats of tax collection and his kowtowing on the original casino pact itself are almost pathetic.

“This is not something I’m going to decide,” Pataki told an Albany audience last week. “I’m still waiting for that consensus to develop at this point.” Although there was never an official diagnosis, we all apparently missed the announcement of his battle with Buffalo Niagara Syndrome; you know, the one that renders political office holders incapable of making decisions and being leaders.

Carl Paladino? Like it is within Seneca politics, money talks, so if nothing else Paladino may be able to throw up a few delaying roadblocks. But don’t hold on to your nickels and quarters hoping for some kind of definitive legal decision that kills the project. And either way, Paladino – hard data notwithstanding -- must figure he wins. Last year, a group headed by the Buffalo developer purchased the Days Inn on, you guessed it, Genesee Street in Cheektowaga.

Still, delay, discourage and dishearten is about the best strategy opponents might have at this point. Beyond Paladino’s threatened lawsuit, Giambra has already suggested the shuddersome shadow of a full environmental impact statement, a rarely used hammer which means big bucks and lengthy delays while everything from traffic patterns to taco chips gets excruciatingly examined by anyone and everyone who has an opinion.

There’s simply no chance Buffalo was as uncooperative as the Senecas would like everyone to believe. Masiello isn’t the only Buffalo office holder desperate for the 15 or 20 million dollars a casino might bring. But, that excuse remains a convenient out for the Senecas, who by now will surely want to build near the airport to, if nothing else, reinforce their almost now untouchable power.

With virtually no one in place to stop them, what the Senecas want, the Senecas get. Just another sign of the times.

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)