

By BRIAN ACKLEY
WIN Columnist

Last week's massive blackout wasn't the first major outage this area has suffered in the last month or so. Although it was a power failure of a completely different kind, it took exactly two public meetings of the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority to produce its own embarrassing near meltdown.

Well after its August 6th meeting, what was discussed, and by whom, was left as nothing more concrete than conjecture. Stories about what might have been privately kicked about changed as quickly as blame in the great Blackout of 2003.

In a swift and stunning show of paranoia, parochialism and at its worst, politically-tinged pea-brained thinking, the nine-member board hasn't just silenced the crescendo of trumpets which heralded their arrival, the band is already ready to pack up and leave town. We threw out the welcome mat, and they tripped.

Despite impassioned pleas at the Buffalo Conversation by any number of citizens and even elected officials to steer clear of politicians, Joel Giambra and Anthony Masiello were anointed anyway. Their agendas run deep, and in the past year or so, have become not only painfully political but also childishly personal between the two. Giambra can't resist any jab at the city, it seems, with his shots rooted more in raw power than regionalism. Not to be outdone, at a time of incredible financial hardship, Masiello just spent \$50,000 to mail a 15-page mea culpa of his administration's failures. In short, neither can stop being a politician. Until they do, their input will be as meaningless and made up as lightning strikes at the Niagara power plant.

It is not at all a stretch to imply that the long-term health of an entire region is in the hands of these nine individuals. No one expects it to be easy, quick, clean. Yet, it seems already apparent most don't fully understand the near savior status to which they were inherently elevated when each agreed to serve. Or how bad the problems really are. Or most frightening of all, how desperate the waitresses, mall store cashiers and taxi cab drivers are for truly visionary, non-partisan solutions. These are the people whose confidence this board so desperately needs.

No matter what they do, criticism is sure to follow. Its every action will be analyzed, every word dissected, every decision a virtual life-and-death call on the long-term prospects of hundreds of thousands of people. That they, and we, surely understand. And in fairness, there will certainly be an occasion or two when private discussion is warranted. But, as sure as we need electricity, "trust us" is no longer good enough.

This is no average local school board, planning commission or village advisory council, all of whom often invoke the generous exceptions to open meeting laws. As control board member Richard Tobe so correctly noted after the second-meeting fiasco, "We shouldn't just comply with the law, we should be willing to go further." He is currently chairing a committee charged with creating a communication blueprint. Believe this: it's one of the most critical documents this group will review in the coming months. If crafted properly, call it a rare second chance to make a good first impression.

Growing pains? Perhaps. One major blackout a year is plenty, thanks. Last week's power outage was an inconvenience. Continued outages of common sense and candor from the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority won't be a blackout, it will be a knockout, and the fight to save a city will be lost.

(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.)