

Opinionated lines, personal whines and ominous signs....

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Movie sequels usually stink, but what's so infuriating about the Victor Getz production of "Driving Mr. Pay Me" is the colossally cavalier attitude taken by his boss.

It's not so much that taxpayers object to the singular fact that Joel Giambra uses a chauffeur – of course his car time can be put to productive use like phone calls and paperwork, no one is denying he's a busy person – it's simply that his guy gets \$81,000 a year to do it.

There'd be a thousand qualified men and women who could reach the gas pedal and keep their eyes on the road for half that salary. His tenacity in keeping the patronage machine humming along without interruption is the single most duplicitous thing Giambra has done in office, and the most damaging message he could send in an effort to advance his regional vision.

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Speaking of that effort, the blue-ribbon committee hoping to formalize and launch Giambra's plan might be lining up at a Salvation Army kettle near you.

It's already months late in being rolled out, and if a dozen or so of the supposed top minds in our area can't even agree on how to get this thing done, how do more than 900,000 or so affected people figure to reach any kind of reasonable consensus?

Actually, it's a good thing the plan isn't fully ready for public consumption, because it seems the whole scheme lacked one important ingredient: any actual money by which to educate, or more cynically put, sell to the public. An interesting oversight, don't you think, since Giambra had no trouble spending tens of thousands of dollars to implore everyone to "do the right thing" during recent budget deliberations

Short of picking up couch cushions, commission members are hitting the bricks to shake down businesses, foundations and probably Bass Pro for all we know in an attempt to cobble together a half-million or so dollars to help explain the plan to voters who will then have less than a year to digest, discuss, deliberate and determine the fate of. On a brighter note, at least it's more time than county lawmakers had to look at and vote on their sham budget. Skeptics might say the condensed discussion period is all part of the plan.

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Nice to see, speaking of the alleged deep thinkers of our region, that Buffalo Common Council member Marc Coppola has gotten the message government can always do it better than private enterprise. His idea of bottling and selling Buffalo's water – yeah, it's especially tasty right about July and August when Lake Erie becomes a frothy cauldron of goodness knows what – comes with the tagline of "Buffalo's Snowflakes Never Tasted So Good," or something like that.

Any need to actually point out the real flake here? Maybe the rest of his time can be spent figuring out ways to sell hot sauce, mustard, blue cheese dressing and spaghetti sauce better than all those Buffalo businesses can.

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Here's a little holiday comfort and cheer for taxpayers – and we're not referring to the state's plans to jump Thruway tolls 25 percent; the very same tolls that were promised to be eliminated by 1996.

Remember all that pretend Albany chatter about reform and accountability and all those hideous things that state lawmakers treat like lumps of stocking coal? It was spurred in large part by a now-famous Brennan Center for Justice report which correctly branded our legislature "the most dysfunctional in the country."

The re-election votes had barely been counted when the message back to constituents was this: just kidding. "Critical report getting cold shoulder at Capital," was the headline on a Nov. 29 article in the *Albany*

Times Union. A Dec. 8 *New York Times* assessment of the temperature there was headlined this way, “Pledges of reform in Albany stumble in a familiar whirl of politics.”

When it comes to actually refashioning political dysfunction here, there and everywhere, we quote the timeless Christmas classic, “Not a creature was stirring ... and to all a good night.”

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a paid weekly 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.)