

Only the airline industry might be in worse fiscal shape than Buffalo and its immediate environs. So we hate to interrupt a string of seriously good regional news – the Bills, Bass Pro, Geico – to bring you some seriously bad: Tom Baker is apparently stepping down as head of the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority.

It's been a while since anyone checked the pulse of the area's only control board (so far), which is probably just as well, since ostensibly the less news they make the better. So maybe we can do like Buffalo leaders have done for years and bury our heads in the sand, hoping somehow that reports of Baker's leaving simply will go away. Or maybe we can just adopt the Yogi Berra "it ain't over 'til it's over" approach and hope that Baker somehow reconsiders his departure.

Assuming neither will change the ultimate outcome, while his departure was the shiny new bike under the Christmas tree at union halls across the region, in reality it's another lump of taxpayer coal in our holiday stockings.

There was always something paradoxical about Baker's role. In his position as head of the region's largest philanthropic organization Baker regularly reinforces the lesson that it's not the size of the check, but the effectiveness and efficiency in how the money is spent. The foundation he oversees is legendary locally for its largess, ironic since that exact same mentality in the public sector is what prompted a fiscal stability board in the first place.

Baker perfectly defined his group's mission shortly after being named control board chairman when he candidly observed, "The city is here to provide services to 290,000 people. It's not here to provide jobs for (several thousand) people."

Of course, he is everything most politicians aren't – a straight talking, sagacious and studied civic leader – all things which immediately made him anathema to unions and those whose interest in protecting the status quo is rooted in shortsighted selfishness. No wonder, since the average Buffalo employee earns more than \$50,000 a year, not even including fringe benefits, compared to an average salary of just under \$19,000 for residents not employed by the money-spewing mother ship.

Baker reinforced that persona from day one, when the control board had its first ever public meeting. Two of the board's nine members were late in attending the 2 p.m. gathering, including County Executive Joel Giambra. Baker brought down the gavel at precisely 2 p.m. anyway, and made note of the fact a pair of his fellow appointees weren't yet on the dais.

And, it wasn't only the unions that provided maddening obstacles to reform. Buffalo Councilman Joseph Golombek – you might have heard him just this week squawking about Bass Pro coming to his city, driven we can only imagine by some pathetic attempt at political relevancy – who actually said board members, "seem to care only about numbers and dollars and cents... What we needed is a control board made up of members who are from the city and really care about its future."

Baker's growing frustrations over meaningful progress on fiscal reform were becoming increasingly obvious. As a recent story in the *Syracuse Post Standard* so aptly termed it, "Big Brother isn't turning out to be as powerful as everyone first thought.". Those in positions to effect true change instead challenged everything but the color of tie he should wear. In less than a year, Baker went from "'Let's give everyone the benefit that this is a learning process," to "There's no management in the city. There's no management in the school system. No effective management."

Were it as simple as some lost luggage, he might still be willing to lead what may turn out to be an impossible effort. But so tangibly grounded is true remedy that one can't blame Baker for taking flight.

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