

By BRIAN ACKLEY
WIN Columnist

The truly disingenuous probably believe Joel Giambra's grandiose vision for Buffalo and Erie County might be a way to get around his publicly stated pledge of not running for a third term in the Rath Building.

Not that he'd be the first politician to ever recant on the notion of stepping down after a couple of terms, mind you. But it's at least technically possible, to stretch a point, for Giambra to become Grand Poobah, or whatever title is bestowed on the Kingdom of Greater Buffalo, and live up to his promise of not seeking three terms as county executive.

True, details aren't just murky about Giambra's vision, they're non-existent, or at best inky black. But in fairness, he didn't promise any either last week when he came out with his regional six-shooters blazing.

Regardless, those whose feathers might potentially fall from their comfy and protected nests have already thrown up their hands, citing everything from the size of the challenge to the notion that such a plan would be "destroying the city," as if Giambra was gleefully dancing through a cloud of dust and rubble after pushing the detonator's plunger. Even if, it beats the cloud of dust from the thousands who kick it up leaving for greener pastures every year.

Everyone talks about the need for change, fresh ideas, new visions. Yet, when someone steps to the plate, whatever the intention, critics tumble out quicker than wings from the Anchor Bar's deep fryer.

If not Giambra now, then who, and when?

One thing not missing from last week's State of the County address was the sense of urgency with which he plans to approach the idea, and that it will come down to one simple question: either you're in or you're out. More than once, Giambra referenced the 2005 Buffalo mayoral race, insisting his political chips would be cashed with whichever candidate genuinely signs on to the regional effort.

Certainly, that figures to be central to Giambra's strategy from here on out, if indeed he is serious and determined about leading such change. He can almost immediately turn the issue into a public referendum long before such a merger might ever get to a true public vote by clearly and unequivocally endorsing legislative and council candidates – regardless of party affiliation – who pledge to make the reinvention of area government platform plank number one.

For now, incumbent Tony Masiello claims to be on board. But public posturing aside, Masiello's political relationship with Giambra is often as tenuous as the coffee cup on Rosie's Brand X paper towel. Giving his initial assessment about the idea, Masiello even then couldn't resist a little swipe at the county. "His government is in trouble, too, and he knows it," said the beleaguered and financial-board-controlled one.

There will be unavoidable missteps along the way; the first of which may already be an announced timetable of having the issue before voters in less than two years. It isn't ambitious, it's virtually undoable.

But, like his recently announced vision for Erie Community College, it should take far more than that to dissuade Giambra from forging ahead. The ECC consolidation, for example, has been a Giambra mantra for several years. That it took so long to come up with concrete plans for something as comparatively simple as that could be viewed as evidence to abandon the consolidation schooner before it ever sets sail. But, the ECC vision was worth the wait. Once unveiled last week, blueprints for a downtown campus were in-depth, intriguing, and a legitimate opportunity for positive change. If the county executive really did want to push the plunger, why is he proposing a \$165 million city investment?

It's easy to label Giambra as arrogant, power hungry or whatever else critics can dream up. King Joel, they like to call him. We're almost out of options. If this is what it takes, long live the King.

(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.)