

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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It must be a real utopia, that magical place known as “elsewhere”.

How else to explain the recommendation that elected officials in Erie County should get raises of 30, 40, even 50 percent over what they now currently are paid?

Of course, that’s always one of the arguments advanced when it comes to increasing salaries of public officials, that someone elsewhere is getting at least that much, if not more. Which is quickly followed by the well worn and tattered woe be to us all, how can we possibly attract quality people by offering such pedestrian wages?

Elsewhere is a lovely place alright, since there’s no appointed control board to rein in out-of-control finances, 10,000 people a decade aren’t leaving for better opportunities, and jobs are as plentiful as beads at Mardi Gras.

The whole debate is fraught with easy cop outs like they don’t deserve raises because they do a lousy job, it’s the well-connected suggesting fat pay hikes for the well-to-do, and so on. The truly disingenuous even suggest a cut in pay in one breath, followed by the disconnected they-knew-what-the-job-paid-when they-ran-logic in the next.

In fact, it’s hard to say if Erie County’s Salary Review Commission did County Executive Joel Giambra and others any favors with their heads-in-the-sand-hands-in-our-wallets analysis. Even though the 1996 county law which established this group said it should meet every two years, they clearly did themselves no favor for not meeting in the last seven. Only when a few county higher ups last year finally said jump did the commission apparently respond with how high?

Surely commission members knew that such ridiculous recommendations would be greeted with angst and apoplectic anger, putting elected officials not in just an uncomfortable position, but a downright indefensible one.

There’s another theory in play here, one favored by many boards and councils who regularly have to pass and in some cases seek voter approval of yearly budgets. Shoot high out of the gate, the blueprint reads, so whatever compromised and lower tax and spending increase you finally arrive at gives in the end the indication of sweating, sacrifice and voter empathy. Of course, all along everyone knew what figure would be “acceptable” right from the start.

So asinine is the notion of such astronomical pay raises – and the system by which they have come about -- that several points of fairness have been shoved aside more quickly than a new Peace Bridge plan. One, the commission was not asked to make recommendations based on performance. Two, even industries in troubled times come up with at least one or two raises every seven years, slight as they may be, for even their poorest employees.

In other words, the truth is, and in all fairness, a raise is not an unreasonable request. In fact, a compromise might be cost of living increases for each of the past seven years, something public bodies like to point to when raising your taxes. Since that usually averages two or three percent a year, then say a 15 percent increase in salaries could be considered an equitable number all the way around.

Giambra has been coyly quiet on the whole issue, simply deferring to whatever final report the commission issues before offering his assessment. He’s too smart to think the whole issue will fly harmlessly under the radar screen, especially in light of the ‘smarter, better, cheaper’ drum he now relentlessly beats. The commander of the USS Consolidation will have enough rocky shoals to navigate in the coming years. Trying to feebly justify a 40 percent pay raise will at best be bothersome, and at worst will undo whatever credibility and support he might already have.

His actions and reactions to the proposal will immediately send a message of just how dedicated Giambra is to see things change. Or, if he too, needs to look elsewhere.

(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

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