

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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The suburban convenience store lights illuminated the dawn sky like the Las Vegas strip. The aroma of fresh coffee was carried on summer breezes to the front door, which was invitingly open.

None of this seemed out of place, except it was 5:45 a.m., and the store wasn't supposed to be open until six. Odder still, there was no employee in sight, even after a quick check up and down each aisle; the cash register drawer was open and empty.

Suspecting the worse, I reached for my cell phone, and while not panicked, was concerned enough to dial 9-1-1. The voice at the other end was the police, all right, convenient enough if the store were located in the City of Buffalo, where this particular dispatcher was located. After quickly explaining the situation, and my exact suburban location, they connected me to the appropriate police agency.

Upon which, hearing the familiar click of the phone being answered, I got ... an answering machine. Seconds later, happily, the clerk appeared, having been out back getting in one last smoke. I had no idea the store wasn't supposed to open for another 15 minutes, which explained the empty, open register.

The story -- all true -- came to mind recently when Nelson Pataki (or is it George Rockerfeller) proposed balancing a five billion dollar budget shortfall by increasing -- to the tune of just short of \$1 billion -- any number of fees and surcharges that he hopes might go unnoticed.

And they will, for the masses are as much resigned to such financial heavy-handedness as lake effect snow in January. One, at least, caught the attention of many voters however, fortunate if only as an example of the absurdity of such fees, and to serve as a lightning rod to shoot down at least some of Pataki's pitiful money grab.

A four-percent surcharge -- read an arbitrary and capricious fee apropos of nothing -- on all professional and sports tickets sold in New York would raise nearly \$40 million if it were take effect. Now, if Ralph Wilson decided his own edifice wasn't good enough any more, and the Yankees decided to make that midtown Manhattan move afterall, and monies to help support that came from such a tax, then fine. Like paying for garbage as you throw, the fee is earmarked, and paid by, those who are mostly affected.

Pataki -- and, just for a little irony, when do you think was the last time he actually paid to attend a sporting event? -- tried to make this little charade palatable by wrapping the fee in public safety improvements, including improved ability for emergency phone systems to better track the location of any cell phone caller. Problem is, just a year ago, the state already imposed a more than dollar-a-month tax on cell phone bills that is supposed to go to correct the exact same problem. How many tens of millions has that raised, and how much of it actually has been spent on its intended target?

In all, according to independent analysis and stripping away all the gimmickry, the state plans on spending about 5.5 percent more this coming budget year. Unacceptable is the mildest of words that come to mind. The lemmings have been led to the edge yet again, and in Pataki's world, each would pay a \$50 user fee for cliff maintenance before jumping. It's phone-it-in policy at a time when we all should demand that someone in Albany, for a change, actually answer the call.

(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.)