

With the starter's pistol aimed squarely skyward, the burning question in the race to regionalism still remains: what chance does any plan have of even getting out of the starting blocks?

With the imminent release of a second plan –unfortunately it's easy to forget that merger maharishi Kevin Gaughan released his own viable version which called for twice as few legislators as the one now being rolled out – critics are already crashing against the breakwall of public opinion in a gale that would re-sink the Edmund Fitzgerald.

But there's no plan that even adequately addresses the one nagging truism which always seems to exist no matter the size, scope or thoughtfulness given any regionalism blueprint. There's proof, sometimes on a daily basis, but always on a weekly one, that those who are closer to the tax money they collect do a better job of properly using it than those higher up the political spending chain.

There's always some nebulous loophole, another unaccountable lawmaker, some distant authority member that answers to no one, who almost regularly rip cold, hard dollars from the hands of taxpayers throughout the region and state.

In just the past few days, it didn't even require breaking a sweat to find David James, J. Gregory Love, Ronald Tocci and the granddaddy of them all, Patricia Freund, as among the more shining examples of most government's don't ask, don't tell spending habits. Don't be surprised if you haven't heard of any of them. But know that collectively, they have cost you hundreds of thousands of dollars.

James and Love are the recently appointed Buffalo deputy fire commissioners who "earned" a week's vacation each in 2004, despite not starting their \$90,000 a year jobs until December. Turns out such city officials are entitled to two weeks vacation in the year they are first hired, regardless of what month they actually started work. The two newcomers didn't even know they could take advantage of such a loophole, until someone in the Masiello administration called to tell them about it. Neither said no to a paid week off – even though they could have -- despite being on the public payroll for less than a month.

Tocci, a two-decade veteran of the New York State assembly, got his \$117,000 golden parachute by filling the job known as New York's Deputy Commissioner of Veteran Affairs. What you might not know is he's the first person to ever hold the position, since as the *Albany Times Union* writes, the "job was created just for him." It might not surprise you to know, either, that despite being a Democrat, he was a major George Pataki pal.

And then there's Freund, who shows up each day at her \$82,000 a year job with the State Liquor Authority, and by her own admission, hasn't actually done any work in the last eight months. She spends her days reading novels and going to lunch, and has pretty much done nothing more than that for going on three years now. After questioning why co-workers were being allowed to attend Pataki's annual prayer breakfast – finally filing a civil suit over it -- her punishment is not being given any work at all.

Why is it allowed to happen? Because the farther away a politician sits from his constituency, the more access they have to unlimited withdrawals at the First National Taxpayer Bank.

Maybe we're looking at this the wrong way. Maybe the villages and towns – the guys and gals who we actually see out for a fish fry on Friday night, in line to buy stamps at the post office, or in the church pew each Sunday – are the ones who need the most power. For they are the ones who consistently show the most personal responsibility to those whose money they take.

Less government is good. Accountability is even better. But sometimes, in the run to the tape, the right idea doesn't always win.

(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.)