

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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In the end, it didn't really matter much what Rochester or Albany or any other city might have been able to put on the table to attract insurance giant GEICO to their region.

Truth be told, their peashooters were woeful next to the six-shooters spun out of holsters by gunslingers of the highest order here last month.

Landing such a plum, with all due respect to whatever regional players were involved – and there were some key Western New Yorkers who at least coordinated some dialogue and kept the train moving down the tracks – this was totally and completely about the big boys, the really big boys, the biggest of the boys when you get right down to it, making a conscious decision that Buffalo Niagara needed GEICO probably more than GEICO needed us.

Consider for a moment the words of company owner Warren Buffet, when he talked with a Rochester television station. “Listen, I love Buffalo,” he told WHEC. “It wasn't going to Rochester. It wasn't going to Utica. It wasn't going to Schenectady. It was going to Buffalo.”

Need more proof that this was a personal crusade of the rich and famous? An Albany publication, in early December, quoted a GEICO vice president as saying the search could take as long as another six months. “When you are picking a site, you don't want to change your mind a few years down the road. So we don't want to rush this,” said Robert Miller, who apparently does not have direct-dial access to Berkshire Hathaway. Three weeks later, the world's second richest man sped the process up just a touch, let's say.

Of course, to be more precise, it was going to Amherst. Not that the location matters, if you're going to be fair to both sides of the regionalism debate.

Expectedly, even sadly, there was private sniping, the arched eyebrows and rolling eyeballs signifying the “Oh, Amherst again” mentality. It's true, state officials played with their own rules – not to mention re-wrote laws -- as if they were games of three-card monty. Tax relief Empire Zones are as out of place in Amherst as open-toe sandals at Ralph Wilson Stadium in December.

It's not as if all 3,000 or so potential workers will live in Williamsville, eat all their meals on Transit Road, or do all their shopping at Eastern Hills Mall. The benefits are hardly only concentrated on the town's 100,000 or so residents. Still, to truly embrace and advance the area's regional agenda, the mid-level boys need to sprinkle significant projects – not a GEICO, they are once in a decade events, but something other than a supermarket or pizza shop -- in the likes of Cheektowaga, Tonawanda, Hamburg and West Seneca.

There were, in fairness, many hands pulling on the rope. But, in the end, that it took some of the most powerful and influential individuals in America, literally, to bring a project of this magnitude here means people who could truly make it happen simply made a personal decision to do so.

Good for them, and thanks. Too bad Bill Gates doesn't have any Western New York roots, because no one really thinks that despite the back-slapping commercials and conveniently sappy sound bites about being a great place to do business, New York in general and Buffalo Niagara in particular suddenly became a white-hot beacon for industrial and service America.

Tax breaks, work force, friendly people, location. The reasons don't matter a whit. The point is: for one of the rare times the revolving door is spinning in, not out. And if it took a benevolent billionaire to help kick start a reversal of fortunes, so be it. It's true, you have to start somewhere. Maybe that light at the end of the tunnel isn't a train after all.

(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.)