

**By BRIAN ACKLEY**  
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Rich Products is throwing in the towel.

Well, not exactly. But it was more than just unsettling a few weeks ago to learn Rich Products is returning some \$2.5 million to New York State because it no longer is able to create any jobs here. And, just as an aside, there's no truth to the rumor that Anthony Masiello is baselessly demanding a percentage of that grant money be blindly handed over to the City of Buffalo.

Turns out that the millions, awarded a couple of years ago, came with the caveat 250 jobs would be created. Shockingly, wink-wink, the company finally decided that was tantamount to Don Paul actually getting a weather forecast right.

The Rich people dutifully cited the obligatory laundry list of issues – labor costs, taxes, high energy – for being unable to fulfill their part of the deal. Using all the political correctness he could muster, Bob Rich Jr. charitably categorized the area's financial climate as “disadvantaged by a range of economic forces.” Uh huh. And in Rich's words, we're guessing that Saddam Hussein was apparently “hampered by flawed ideology.”

Taking a page from the What-Me-Worry Masiello school of shock and awe, Buffalo Niagara Partnership leader Andrew Rudnick offered unfailing precision and clarity in his response to the news: “...sometimes things change.”

Sadly, last month, it didn't stop there. Just days prior to the Rich debacle came word of \$1.5 million in unspent funds under control of something called the Erie County Workforce Investment Board. Heard of that group before? Neither had we. Still, there they were, admitting an inability to give away hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars earmarked for employee training. No word from Masiello on this pile of unclaimed money either, or what percentage of it he thinks he's entitled to.

Ironically, the unspent money is part of \$3.3 million in grants handed out over the past two years, some of which was doled out to, you guessed it, Rich Products. To get the grant, Rich was supposed to create almost four dozen new jobs. Obviously, that didn't happen. The money did help retrain several hundred company workers, however, prompting a rationalization from the frozen-food giant that those dollars were put to use in “significant ways.”

Don't get the wrong picture. This is not about bashing Rich Products, not for a non-dairy second. Few businesses have been more dedicated to the well being of the area. Yet, it all funnels to a truly frightening question. If Rich Products can't create any jobs in Western New York, who can? It's pointless, if not depressing, to rehash the ever growing list of companies that have left the region, not only within the city limits, but suburban townships too. But if this area's ugly and life-sucking tentacles can wrap themselves around something like Rich Products, who's not in danger?

No longer is it about being able to attract jobs -- any job -- much less good paying, white collar, solidly rooted ones. It's all about what a Fortune 500 company can do to hang on to the meager crumbs they already have. Being able to just do that is now labeled as “significant.”

There is a lesson to be learned, before the towel transforms from proverbial to possible. For years, in fact, decades, we have invested countless resources on trying to lure outsiders here. It's time, instead of lavish west coast parties for businesses that will never come, to take care of and focus on our own.

*(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a paid weekly 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](http://www.wnynewspapers.com). Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)*