

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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All that seemed to be missing from last week's regionalism "conversation" – besides Albany politicians and the haze of cigar smoke banned by their laws – was the reincarnation of Boss Tweed.

Described by *Smithsonian Magazine* as the preeminent powerbroker who "ruled and plundered (New York) so shamelessly that his name became synonymous with corruption and chicanery," it was easy to imagine his hulking, sweaty figure stepping up to the microphone to defend his turf, which yet again was one of the prevalent themes in this third attempt at constructive cross-community communication.

He would have been right at home in the Daemen College hot box, rolling out one of his long favorite quotes regarding a merged Buffalo and Erie County government: "I don't care who does the electing as long as I get to do the nominating."

Look, conversation is a great thing. The idea is noble, the effort laudable. An incredible amount of time, effort, energy and money is poured into each of these exercises. Maybe the expectations are too high, that some power of enlightenment will suddenly float through the doors and settle into every seat.

But once again, this exercise in democracy turned into a largely vapid morass of politicians who interpreted red lights on cameras and open microphones as the equivalent of the starter dropping the green flag on the Indianapolis 500. Elected officials from every level couldn't wait to press the pedal to the metal to flog every old complaint and regurgitate every perceived barrier. When outside experts offered their experiences and ideas, they were quickly trumped by every "can't" imaginable. Solutions were as hard to find, on this particular night, as a literal and figurative breath of fresh air.

The proposed centerpiece of the evening – a legal study designed to forewarn everyone as to just how high the merger hurdles would be – was hardly the focus of the discussion that it should have been. And, really, that was the problem. Too many tangents, too little troubleshooting. If the heat wasn't high enough, the hostility was, as noted by one of the outside consultants.

Suburban reaction was decidedly mixed, certainly among the big hitters. While West Seneca's Paul Clark and Hamburg's Kathy Hochul were comparatively eloquent in their pleas to pull on the same rope; all Amherst's Susan Grelick could muster was a wobbly, worn out and repetitive "it depends".

When Erie County announces a real plan, promised by Erie County Executive Joel Giambra within the next two months, then maybe the questions can be more pointed, the mindless and puerile rhetoric packed away, at least for a while.

But, the fact is, if we can't even agree on a simple, painless and obvious "buy in" like a merger of county and city parks then there's no hope, no matter how blue-ribbon the panel might be, of a blueprint that will push us all in a positive direction. Like the city, when Erie County's fiscal plight reaches meltdown proportions – and don't say you haven't been warned, it's likely closer to that point than you may think – only then will opinions be changed and new ideas be considered. From all sides, and all too soon, the regionalism debate will be fueled by crisis, not common sense. It would be nice to be populated with forward thinkers who understood and acted on the big picture – as we were poignantly reminded about time and again by the death of Ronald Reagan -- not just the snapshot of their own little world. Sadly, we're not.

By all means, keep the dialogue going. Bad dialogue is better than none at all. But Tweed might indeed be the perfect analogy. Despite a lifetime of personal self-centeredness designed to control power and favor, The Boss ended up dying in debtor's prison, a broken, beaten, penniless soul.

Sound like an area we all know? Then why is it a repeated lesson we all like to converse about, but from which we stubbornly and steadfastly refuse to learn.

(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.)