

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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James Tedisco isn't a state assemblyman from these parts, but maybe we should wish he was.

Like Buffalo, Tedisco represents an area with a race track, Saratoga to be exact. And his analogy about casinos and their effect on a region may be the most accurate one out there.

"It's like a doctor prescribing two pills," he offered. "You take the two pills and you feel better. You take 15 and you die."

His thoughts have taken on more relevancy of late with New York again floating the trial balloon of allowing non-Indian casinos to be opened in the Empire State. This against a flurry of activity, some public, some largely unnoticed or unappreciated, including the tens of thousands of dollars being spent on a delusory Seneca Nation advertising campaign, as if their dollars and problems might convince everyday voters that Albany really is the snake pit of vipers and scheming self-protectionists we often suspect it to be.

Like unions refusing to rationally deal with perceived economic threats, the Senecas have left no emotional button unpushed, using Vietnam, the Pledge of Allegiance and the Star Spangled Banner as platforms on which to pitch their position. Interesting that Senecas would launch a public attack on the very politicians who allowed their casinos in the first place. But that's what languishing plans in Buffalo and the Catskills, among other places, will do to those who once shared the same peace pipe.

Here's a suggestion. Forget salaries and taxes and waterfront development as issues that will stir authentic electorate emotion. Raise cigarette prices by 20 bucks a pack; now that would get the phone lines humming.

So seemingly arbitrary is the playing of the divisive sovereignty card – it's at the heart of the Seneca's own internal split on the casino issue -- that tribal officials couldn't wait to allow New York State to audit their casino books as part of getting a casino-opening agreement done.

With the imminent opening of two local "racinos" in Hamburg and Batavia, and the state's renewed interest in pushing ahead with its own casino plan, it's no wonder the *New York Times* recently noted the groundswell of opposition to Indian casinos "is, if anything, picking up strength in some areas."

Not surprisingly, and despite obvious indications of unfulfilled and broken promises here and elsewhere when it comes to casino development, local "leaders" still cling to the money mirage.

"What's shocking to me is that, if you had any other company that was going to employ 2,500 people and pay them \$30,000 a year and up and generate millions of dollars in private investment, people would be falling all over them," Buffalo Mayor Tony Masiello cluelessly told *The Times*. "I don't know what the big deal is."

Outside Western New York, the Senecas are apparently leaving little to chance in Washington as well. Turns out taxes aren't the only thing from which Indians are exempt. Although it has been little noticed, former Department of Interior lawyer Michael Rossetti, the man described as a "key adviser" for Interior Secretary Gale North's Seneca casino approval, recently left that post to conveniently land at the tribe's D.C.-based lobbying firm of Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer and Feld.

Amazingly, Rossetti can pick up the phone today, and invite his former boss to lunch tomorrow to solicit on behalf of the Senecas, despite the national Ethics in Government Act that supposedly safeguards against such cozy arrangements. Not in this case. Federal law exempts lobbyists for Indian tribes from the normal two-year waiting period before such activity is legally allowed.

What we have here is far from a confluence of coincidence. Is the tide turning, ever so slowly? OK, true, halting casino hysteria is still the longest of shots, but opponents may finally have more to work with than take two and call us in the morning.

(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.)