

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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“We find many of our services hemmed in and hedged by those artificial boundaries which still are fine for many local purposes, but which are only in the way when it comes to providing us with the services we need in the most efficient way and at the lowest possible cost,” reads the Buffalo newspaper article. “Our fractional government and fragmentary approach to solutions to our problems are costly and inefficient.”

Other stories carry headlines that appear today with so much regularity, voters have simply stopped paying attention. “Traffic Congestion Clogs Suburbs,” reads one. “Suburbs Oppose Police Merger,” trumpets another. The list goes on: “Water Rate Defies Comprehension”, “Assessments Confusing to Taxpayers”. Here’s one that builds acid in the stomach on almost a daily basis, “Politics Hinders Solution of Problems.”

Interesting reading, to be sure. Especially since those quotes and headlines came directly from the pages of the 1956 *Buffalo Courier Express*. Nearly 50 years ago, the *Courier* spent two full months – 65 stories in all – examining everything from the role of automobiles to voter apathy, and how it effected Buffalo and its suburbs. The enterprising series of stories carried a simple title: “Erie County: Time for Action.” Talk about words that don’t just stand the test of time, they define it.

It was particularly interesting reading for Joel Giambra, who just a couple of weeks ago finished perusing the series. If it hasn’t become clear already, Giambra not only is welcoming a fight with city hall, he’s relishing it. Like a turn-of-the-century bare fisted brawler, the executive is ready to throw haymakers, not just dainty little jabs. Forget ruffling feathers, he’s ready to personally pluck every patch of patronage-laden plumage -- one tuft at a time.

This is going to be fun.

“How sick are you of seeing a county plow go over a town road and lift its blade,” Giambra asked members of the Western New York Independent Newspaper group last week. “All over the place, people are lifting blades. They spend more time figuring out if it’s their road or not, if they should keep the plow down or up, than they do plowing. So why isn’t there regional plowing? Now, the highway superintendents will hate me if you write about that. Write it, because it makes sense.”

Forget ideological. The debate is practical, through and through. Giambra doesn’t want the inch, he wants the mile, all of them.

“If we do this, then what else is next? If we let this happen, we’re opening the door,” he said about the typically paranoid reaction of office holders and public employees county-wide. “Why would the suburban police department be against the Buffalo police and the Erie County Sheriff’s Department merging? Because it’s ‘us’ next. So I’m not just fighting the Buffalo police department, I’m fighting 19 police chiefs not even in their area. That’s what we’re up against. Now there’s no more money from Albany or Washington. How do I look now boys? Want to merge?”

He’s on a take-no-prisoners roll now, a roll he hopes lasts more than the three years left in what he continues to insist will be his last term as executive. He doesn’t worry about a title, not now, not then.

“I’m in favor of a little bit of a benevolent dictatorship. If you’re a strong leader, you often get accused of being a dictator,” he said. “I like to lead. I’m going to continue to be aggressive, ambitious and project a new vision. We’re going to play smash-mouth football. Are you in? If not, I’m going to be your worst nightmare. I’m going to go talk to your local newspaper, your Lions and your Rotary clubs and your Chambers and anybody that will listen and tell them you just said no to a 14 percent tax cut. People may say I’m a dictator. I’m a dictator then. I’ve been called worse.”

“The time is now! The old ways have changed. Erie County must change with them. It is not maybe. It is not perhaps. It is inevitable,” the *Courier* exclaimed. Exactly.

(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.)

