

Forget about jobs, the economy, taxes, health care and education as issues that might just decide the upcoming Buffalo Niagara free-for-all, also known as the race to replace Jack Quinn in Congress.

Whoever emerges victorious, the winner will have ripple effects all over the region. In fact, there hasn't been a reshuffling of the local political deck this entertaining in decades.

And, while we're all already being subjected to the tedious and tired boilerplate rhetoric that candidates for some reason think really resonate with voters – how about talking about something tangible, like getting more roads paved, taking the lead on Bass Pro, the Peace Bridge? -- it's more than a little funny to think that the balance of the vote could be tipped by a desk.

Amazingly, there wasn't one single, solitary lawsuit filed last week or this, best we can tell, over Joel Giambra's teeny tiny potential transgression over desks, filing cabinets and carpet. But it is hardly a story that has lost its legs. Au contraire – this issue is surely geared up for a full marathon. Taking a Rath Building perspective here, at the very least, "Furniture-gate" will be nothing more than a covert factor in a couple of political races. The worst case: it becomes a referendum on Giambra's political shelf life.

Normally, \$500,000 here and there hardly constitutes a ripple among the constituency, but as we've all come to painfully learn, things are about as far from normal as you can get around here at this point. If Buffalo is ablaze financially, Erie County is a smoldering pile of tinder-dry brush. County officials haven't officially brought out the lighter fluid and matches to make us sit up and fearfully take notice of the potential conflagration, but they haven't exactly been publicly running around with a fire hose either.

A couple of months ago, Giambra pegged the county's potential budget shortfall at some \$50 million. It's unlikely times have gotten that much better in the intervening weeks to shrink that expectation. In that context, a half-million dollars keeps a lot of services on the books.

Besides becoming a giant potential Giambra millstone, the whole messy misstep might have already seriously undermined his regionalism repartee, since he's offered nothing but a weak, vague and generally uninspired "wait-til-you-hear-the-whole-story" defense to this point.

If you're going to overspend, the reasons for doing it better be pretty clear, and the check better be written to someone other than a GOP goombah. The pusher of the regionalism cart needs to be above partisan reproach on every issue, not just ones that might score issues with voters. True, we need the final facts and explanations, but in the perception-is-reality world of politics, there's already some significant damage that's been done.

Without question the big winner -- besides taxpayers if something untoward is uncovered -- will be GOP congressional hopeful Nancy Naples. Every single time the story surfaces between now and November, bet the campaign fund the GOP will find a way to wrap the words Naples and watchdog around it. In fact, the Associated Press account of her candidacy – besides some generic quotes regarding the aforementioned rhetoric – cited just one issue from her time as county comptroller in its story. And you don't need to be able to properly read an office equipment vendor's list to figure out exactly what that issue might have been.

Unless Quinn tipped her off months ago, and the fact that everyone right down to his most trusted advisors insist they had no idea his leaving the House was imminent nixes that thought, her timing is fortuitous and potentially fruitful. The harvest better come by the bushel-full, because even with the kind of personal and GOP dollars tossed into her effort, it's still hard to imagine overcoming the second largest Congressional Democratic-Republican enrollment discrepancy in the whole United States, regardless of how bloody and expensive the Dem primary might become.

Those were some expensive desks. The real question is: who in the long run is going to pay the true political price?

(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.)