

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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It's hard to imagine Joel Giambra serving out his public life snipping ceremonial ribbons to open new picnic shelters.

Yet, given the developments of the past few months – and more specifically Giambra's reaction to them – one can't help but wonder when the exact moment was that he morphed into former Erie County Executive Ed Rutkowski.

It almost seems like ancient history, but no less painful, when Rutkowski proposed a temporary sales tax increase to help close a staggering budget deficit. For his effort the former Bills' QB, after being sacked unceremoniously by county voters, still managed a pillowy GOP landing by grabbing a spot heading up state parks in this neck of the woods.

Giambra might do well to be so fortunate; this, remember, is the man who the Republicans touted as a potential future candidate for everything from Governor to dog catcher. His last 60 days have wallowed somewhere between dismal and disastrous, yet the man who wants to save the Buffalo Niagara Region – but apparently forget to budget any money to actually present his vision to the public, another column for another week – can it seem only muster enough political courage for already-tiresome finger pointing and blame at everyone but himself.

To be sure, it's a crash and burn teetering on Rutkowskian proportion.

Not that Giambra is entirely wrong. Albany is an egregiously dysfunctional disaster, and Giambra is relishing the opportunity to provide a personal 50,000-watt fan to flame the smoldering spark of potential reform that might just be ready to finally ignite there.

As evidence, a grassroots website (freenys.org) recently launched by a downstate farmer had to be temporarily shut down by its service provider because Albany actually complained about the volume of negative e-mail it was creating. Major daily newspapers in New York – including the *Ithaca Journal*, *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* and *Kingston Daily* – are so disgusted at the choices for office, rigged by a gerrymandering process that almost assures non-competitive races, they aren't even bothering to endorse candidates this fall.

Our state leaders can't even get change right. Legislators, who passed a mild budget reform bill in June, haven't even bothered to submit it to the governor's office yet. At least that one passed. Ninety-six percent of the bills introduced last year in Albany didn't.

"I am entirely blaming Albany because Albany is entirely to blame for the problem," Giambra exclaimed last week, a mantra that sent county executives statewide scrambling for PowerPoint projectors to get the word out about Albany's dastardly ways.

It would all be well and good if anyone, someone, thought all these counties were run even remotely close to efficient. At the same time our local leaders were screaming about Albany, the Giambra administration admitted they couldn't even tell taxpayers how their county-owned cars are being used. Of course, when the financial morass reaches epic proportions, small things like that don't matter anymore, missing the point that if small matters had been handled all along, the crisis would be eminently more manageable. Giambra acting like Albany's role in the budget debacle suddenly popped up like magnetic yellow ribbons on the back of suburban SUV's serves no one, least of all taxpayers.

Hello kettle? The pot here. Yup, still black

Maybe we're too cynical. Maybe it's all part of the Giambra plan to force a regionalism vote, whether we're ready for one or not. Maybe, his thinking goes, one local government in sordid shambles isn't enough to put us over the top, but two will be. And Albany makes three.

It could be worse. Oneida County – weren't they supposed to be saved by a casino too? – is threatening to raise its sales tax to just under 10 percent. Apparently they've already turned over all the stones they can in finding new revenue, pun intended.

"This is the most excruciating budget year I have ever confronted," said Oneida executive Joseph Griffo. Pack some extra chicken. That picnic shelter might be pretty crowded.

(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.)