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Stop the presses.

You could almost see someone running back to the office, shirt tail flapping in the wind, one hand holding on to the fedora. Such was the reaction last week when Erie County Democrats gathered the willing, er, media, to breathlessly announce a new poll that showed their anointed one, Dan Ward, in what they described as a statistical dead heat in next month's Erie County Executive race.

Broadcast and print outlets screamed out the numbers as if they had come from a consortium of Gallup, J.D. Power and A.C. Neilsen themselves. It would be easy to dismiss the reaction as simply ridiculous if it weren't more along the lines of colossally embarrassing.

Let's see, the Democrats own poll -- one they paid for, controlled, designed questions for and selectively decided what number to make public-- was the basis for public pronouncement that -- *gasp* -- we have a race! People who should know better bought these allegedly "newsworthy" numbers hook, line and stinker, choosing poll's most patently optimistic interpretation. A equally plausible yet conservative interpretation -- since Giambra's lead was five percent, but the poll itself had a five percent margin of error -- could have produced this headline: "Ward trails Giambra by double digits in Dems own poll."

Maybe Tony Masiello can hire the same pollsters and ask local residents, all things being equal (or maybe ignored), trying to determine whether or not Buffalo is a nice place to live. Given that non-threatening question, he might be able to find even a simple majority of those who are left who would say yes. Then, he could wave it in the face of Buffalo Financial Control Board members and say "see, I knew we were doing a great job!"

It's hard to say the race is over since it never really got started. Dan Ward's best chance of finding a seat in the Rath Building in 2004 will be as a spectator in the legislative chambers. It's not like incumbent Joel Giambra is using nepalm on an ant hill here either. His "attack" adds accuse some of Ward's actions as "inappropriate", and we don't mean in an Arnold Schwarzenegger kind of way. Giambra's big anti-Ward "catch phrase" is something along the line of the "more you know, the more you wonder." Shiver me timbers. It's possible that Ward has been running ads -- and he has a heck of a nice looking website -- but it's hard to remember when you're getting outspent, or at least the potential to be outspent, is something like 15-to-1.

Giambra's biggest trouble is not Dan Ward, but the double edged nature of his constant regionalism and consolidation chant. There's few that doubt some, maybe a lot of that has to happen around here in the coming years. The trick is to emancipate us all from fruitless overlap of services and paper pushers without simply coming off as the Emperor of Erie.

An actual respectable poll, done by admittedly GOP friendly Gerald Goldhaber, showed Giambra's lead at a much more believable 22 percent. But the credibility of a Goldhaber poll is wider than the vote gap between Schwarzenegger and say, pick one, Gary Coleman.

Len Lenihan, the affable leader of county Democrats, provided the comedic relief moment of an otherwise leaden election when he managed to intone that the Goldhaber numbers somehow, "confirms what our poll showed earlier this week -- Joel Giambra is in serious trouble."

Cue the cheesy laugh track. If that were true, it would be a reason to stop the presses indeed.