

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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Even though the City of Buffalo has pretty much become a financial train wreck, it's still hard to tell who's out front yelling "All Abooooooard!"

But someone is clearly punching tickets validating anyone and everyone to weigh in on all matters money, whether they have an actual and meaningful role in the process or not. In football, it's called piling on.

Front and center in the latest but hardly greatest round of grandstanding is anyone at any level of power offering an opinion and resolution to the perpetual charade of extending Erie County's temporary additional one-percent sales tax. Of course, that is, everyone but the masses who actually pay it on a daily basis, the same masses who became tired of this annual folly while Ronald Reagan was still waving and winking his way through the twilight years of his Oval Office stay.

Although, watching state lawmakers lob extortion threats – empty as the middle of a Krispy Kreme – is almost enough to give county taxpayers a perverse sense of pleasure. County lawmakers have been insulting taxpayers for 18 years now by simply not making the one percent permanent. Really, would that be so hard at this point to make that change? Of course, making it a permanent fixture that just fades to black like so many tax and spend issues in politics doesn't allow for annual saber-rattling, paper-waving, fear-inducing invective.

It doesn't take the Amazing Kreskin – although if he's related to some Buffalo Niagara powerbroker I'm sure we can get him some hefty consultant's fee – to figure out that somewhere down the line, the county will end up making a deal to share some of that revenue. When might be the difficult part to figure out here, but it seems to have left the station already and how is the one big trestle left to cross.

But when the deal comes, we can at least hope it's actually meaningful. It's scary to hear the word "deal" and "politicians" in the same sentence, I know. It's usually standard operating procedure to shield your eyes and reach for your checkbook. But, in this case, County Executive Joel Giambra actually appears to have enough leverage to exact some significant reform.

It's not like the \$110 million the extra penny actually produces is used to build golf courses, for example. His harshest and most cynical critics understand that. Erie County minority leader George Holt, after an obligatory show of support for his state Democratic leaders, weighed in with some clear thinking about the notion of simply turning over a no-strings-attached revenue stream to the city. "We're not getting to the core of the problem," he said. "We're just protecting our own political agendas."

Simply insisting the county cough up tens of millions of dollars amounts to a sleazy, shallow, specious shell game. Of course, for the last 10 or 20 years, most of the politically-driven financial maneuvering in these parts would fall under that heading. Boiled down to its most basic point: Buffalo's mess, and Erie County's increasingly stretched resources are all about paying the piper, nothing more, nothing less.

Maybe it's not a train wreck yet. But it is certainly a fast sinking vessel. The politicians need to step back – realizing of course this violates every living, breathing instinct known to them -- and let the control board actually come up with ink-on-paper recommendations. Then, and only then, will their trifling and trivial yappings be worth even passing attention. Otherwise, all that will be left for them is to yell "abandon ship."

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a paid weekly 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.)