

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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(Editor's Note: This is the second in a multi-part series regarding plans proposing a regional/metro government for Buffalo and Erie County.)

There are at least two truisms about voters in these parts.

One, almost none of us pay as much attention to the electoral process as we should. And two, any meaningful change in our local political structure in the past few years – downsizing of both the Buffalo Common Council and Erie County Legislature, small as they may have been – came because voters, by way of referendum, said it must.

Kevin Gaughan is hoping for improvement in the former, a continuation of the latter, in getting the toughest of the converts – the suburbs – to finally embrace the need for fundamental structural change. His vision – a 10-person board for all of Erie County, replacing the legislature and Buffalo council, will soon be measured against the county's own recommendation, drawn up by an 11-panel group called the Greater Buffalo Working Commission. When, exactly, the curtain will be raised on their thoughts is anyone's guess, but it will be this fall.

But this won't be a convention center, waterfront, Peace Bridge debate that so bogs down that the resulting and inevitable inertia obscures any reasonable discussion or thought. Whatever its form, a final regionalism plan will travel at the speed of light to where it belongs: the voting booth.

"I think this decision is going to be placed before Western New Yorkers next year. I'm convinced of it," Gaughan offered. County Executive Joel Giambra seriously, but only briefly, considered a 2004 referendum, before deciding even that was too quick "In my judgement, it would be nicer to have a little more time to create consensus, but the harsh reality is that there is no way you can sustain this city. In 2006, they are estimating a \$140 million deficit, so that's going to compel Western New Yorkers to make this decision perhaps even sooner than I would like."

In other words, the time for conversations – in addition to regionalism, Gaughan's favorite word – is all but over. For the Hamburg attorney, everyone, it seems, has had a say. The Greater Buffalo Commission approach has to meet privately to hash out proposed legislation. Not once so far have they held a public session for community input.

"I've come to believe, based on observing these other communities that have moved from discussion to action, what's the cliché? Talk is cheap? I've come to believe that's true when it's the wrong kind of talk, or bad talk. And one of the outgrowths of bad talk is it goes on forever.

"But true conversation, which has to be open and inclusive, does have a beginning and an end, because it cuts the legs off of those people who come and say we weren't part of this and therefore we can't move forward. Skepticism rises to cynicism much quicker today than it used to if people feel excluded."

Most significantly, he says, the numbers support another truism few are willing to admit.

"From Orchard Park, Amherst, clearly in Tonawanda, Kenmore, West Seneca, that as a matter of housing stock value, per capita income, certainly population, these areas are headed down. It's right there in the numbers, it's easily seen. But no one has made that case yet," he argues. "In other words, it's not just the city that is headed down, it is the region."

“Those are empirical, scholarly numbers that have to be translated into understandable realities,” Gaughan added. “So I guess I’ve come to realize that to get folks in those most successful little pockets – which are becoming smaller and smaller in Western New York – we’re going to not only show them the money but show them the benefit. We have to show them it can be done with a realistic level of sacrifice, that’s evenly spread.”

Truism number three, he hopes.

(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.)