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(Editor's Note: This is the last in a series regarding plans proposing a regional/metro government for Buffalo and Erie County.)

Imagine learning to play the “Flight of the Bumblebee” in say, 12 months. And there’s no room for even one missed note.

If Joel Giambra owns the orchestra, then Ken Vetter is the man on the podium waving the baton, trying to get everyone to properly read the notes, or in this case, more accurately, the handwriting on the wall. Essentially, Vetter is being charged with finalizing, rolling out, and eventually selling to a highly skeptical audience the vision of 11 community leaders who sometime in the coming weeks will release their plan to merge Buffalo and Erie County into one governmental unit. The goal is to have it before voters in November, 2005.

There’s only a certain amount of time you can keep the energy up, keep people interested in this,” Vetter said. “If you make this a two or three year thing, you’ve lost it. I mean, two or three years out from the Olympics, who cares? If the community isn’t energized, it will fail, period.”

He notes, laughingly, success might not take a conductor’s baton but a magician’s wand. Vetter was the band leader for the county’s massive Who Does What? study which helped lay the foundation for at least some modest consolidations victories; triumphs on a scale, however, decidedly smaller than the one he’s undertaking now.

“I think in some ways it may be easier to do it this way,” he explained. “With each initiative, like the county taking over city parks, they have been extremely time consuming, very emotional, very grind it out issues. So, taking these issues one by one, I can’t see an exponential amount of difficulty taking on the whole thing.”

Unlike the recently proposed Kevin Gaughan initiative – which calls for a regional legislative body of 10 and has been crafted after long, hot, inclusive public debate – the Giambra gang has hashed out its proposal in private. And that’s no mistake.

“Part of the reason for trying to do things quietly initially is that you’re getting a collection of thoughts together. It’s hard to do that out in the public arena, nothing against bringing things out to everyone in the world, but if you just bring out a collection of thoughts then it does die before it takes root.” Vetter said. “It’s not that this is a huge secret. This is going to be debated every way, up and down, everywhere, have road show will travel.”

It’s still not clear what the proposal will call for, at least in terms of total elected officials, but it’s almost certain it will be more, perhaps significantly more, than Gaughan’s number. If so, it would be hard to imagine any plan flying that didn’t at least reasonably reduce the total number of elected officials. Voters overwhelmingly, once in the city and once in the county over the past few years, have affirmed the appeal of smaller, more streamlined governments.

“At this point, and still working through these things, it’s probably one of the things people will more tell us, what the representation could and should be,” Vetter indicated. “The way the document is being crafted is really a first position. What’s proposed might not be what ultimately happens.”

And, if there’s one point on which both sides seem to agree, it’s that the facts themselves will ultimately need to convince everyone that a regional government will lead to sweeter music.

“It’s not a selling strategy in saying here’s all the information, here are questions, here are the issues, here’s what we have as answers, here’s what we’ve heard from you, if there’s anything else you want to know, let us know,” Vetter observed. “I don’t think you can really sell something like this. If it’s something that really resonates, things will happen.”

Both sides, too, are fond of pointing to such success stories as Louisville, Portland, Indianapolis and Jacksonville. While their rebirths are a model, it also leaves Buffalo Niagara additionally challenged.

“We’re now competing against areas that have gone through this merger, they have job growth, they have population growth. That’s who we’re competing against,” Vetter added.

Time to strike up the band.

(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.)