

Consider, for a moment, these following quotes. Any of them ring even a vague bell?

“It brings everybody in. The control board is not going to be influenced by politics,” said the Mayor. “It is all black and white. They’ll look at budgets and make sure what is proposed and what passes is realistic.”

“We can see a need for a control board with real teeth,” said the state GOP rep. “Until the tough work regarding expenditures is done, we do not see any need to discuss any tax increase proposals.”

“I’d like to see a control board set up and force the hand of the mayor,” said the state Democrat senator. “We never can get real numbers from the city.”

Pretty familiar stuff, actually. Until you consider the Mayor is Schenectady’s Albert P. Jurczynski, the state rep is Pennsylvania’s Mike Turzai, and the Democratic Senator is suburban Pittsburgh’s Sean Logan.

So sure is Jurczynski that Schenectady will be run by outsiders, he traveled to Buffalo August 13 to meet with Anthony Masiello, among others, no doubt finding out first-hand what it is to be reduced to a city’s chief of ribbon cuttings.

Control boards, it seems, have become as trendy as the Atkins Diet, designed to leave the meat but cut out the filling extras that left us so bloated in the first place. Buffalo, Schenectady, Pittsburgh, rust belt cities all, invested in everything but the future. It’s time to stop using Advil on a migraine.

Is it instructive to see others now heading for the cliff, Buffalo having just gotten there a little sooner? Maybe, but only in that all the blame doesn’t lie at the doorstep of City Hall. That they haven’t been able to fully even understand the problems, it seems, much less provide solutions, is hardly shocking. Perhaps it’s because the numbers are so colossally staggering, or the alternatives are more distasteful than a cod liver oil chaser, that local politicians simply can’t imagine what life without them might entail.

The problems, as we’ve all suspected, are systemic at virtually every level. A little short this year? No problem, here’s a little extra state aid that’s been laying around. We haven’t been voting in public officials all these years. We’ve elected enablers. Control boards are the tough love interventionists. At the very least, they provide cover for tough choices that have simply gone unmade for too long. At best, they are a tool that can save an area unable to save itself.

The group’s ongoing tweaks and concerns and admonishments of the city’s fiscal ideas are barely the opening volley in a long struggle to regain control of our own fate. But, then, it’s sad that they have to even point all this out in the first place. It’s clear what the city is offering: excuses. The control board has been equally precise: the enabling stops here.

Jurczynski termed his Buffalo trip a “fact finding mission.” He found pretty unhappy faces and grim facts, but hardly grimmer than his recently unveiled 2004 budget which calls for a 16.4 percent property tax increase, that after a 25 percent hike in the very same tax this year. It calls for consolidations, and layoffs in police and fire protection.

Pittsburgh’s deficit could be as high as \$60 million. Good bye political patronage, hello control board. The parallels are both sad and surreal. Buffalo’s brush with insolvency is a very close encounter. We are not alone. That doesn’t make us feel any better though, does it?

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