

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

Set aside, for a while, control boards and lawsuits, football rookie broken legs and the lousy summer weather.

When the fall leaves begin their splashy show soon, there will be one overriding topic that will command attention of city and suburban residents alike, one that might come upon them more quickly than they think, and one that can meaningfully and effectively define who we are and where we are going in the decades to come.

In the coming weeks, something called the Greater Buffalo Working Committee will put forth their vision of a merged city/county government. Crafted largely in private, the 11-person group already has drafted a proposed 16-page state legislative bill that outlines their vision of a new Erie County. A few weeks back, regionalism reformer Kevin Gaughan unveiled his vision of a proposed metro structure that would oversee us all.

While the plans are starkly different on some key point, there are a few things becoming clear: the move to put some plan before voters will come more quickly than most of us expect, and the debate will be emotional, heated, passionate and just plain difficult.

My sense is once the specific proposals are out there and debated, the number of people who actually favor it will decrease at first," Gaughan offers. "It's easier to support an assertion than a specific. It may prove to be almost as hard as finding a warm sunny day in 2004."

His plan is intriguing on several fronts. First, it's driven from the city out, not the suburbs in. In fact, suburban voters would see very little change, at least initially. Village and town government structures continue as they do today. It makes the buy in price for Amherst, East Aurora and Hamburg something above the bargain aisle at Wal Mart, but hardly the sticker shock of a Saks Fifth Avenue. Second, it dramatically reduces the tangible number of those who govern, from a combined 26 lawmakers now between the Buffalo Common Council and county legislator, to 10 total regional representatives

"Those who have succeeded in achieving this reform – Jacksonville, Louisville – someone did something that neither Joel Giambra, and frankly what I have not done as well as I wanted to, is speak specifically to the people of Buffalo and tell them here is where you are now, here's where you can be if we achieve this reform, and we capture the savings and put them to these uses. How is your neighborhood and life going to be improved by this massive change."

If money is the root of all evil, maybe it can be the root of some good, too, Gaughan believes.

"The folks that were in the forefront of the Louisville consolidation will tell you that the city redeveloped as a direct result of the savings after the consolidation. The truth of the matter is there is a connection, there's no doubt about it. That could be the tipping point. We have to connect this large, amorphous, somewhat overly intellectual idea into forthright, understandable benefits to average citizens. That's the only way we're going to get this done."

It's been almost eight years since the Hamburg-based lawyer laid out his initial visions, during a conference at the Chautauqua Institution. It's not like things have gotten better around here since.

"At best right now, there's a 50/50 red state, blue state split among Western New Yorkers over whether this should happen," he said, searching but not finding some silver bullet that would make the consolidation idea fly. "It's ideas and potential and hope that capture human imagination. Context is everything, and the context in which we're having this debate, even a school child would recognize there is something terribly wrong."

What ever sunshine such a plan brings, it's rays would necessarily reflect first and foremost in Buffalo.

"On top of the 50 years of white flight, there's now African American flight from the east side," he observed. "They're not moving out of the city, but they're moving into other areas. Certainly government consolidation isn't the complete answer, but at least it can create a foundation for ways we can honestly address policies."

*(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](http://www.wnynewspapers.com). Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)*