

letters

to the Editor

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County would be set back by Keane

With candidates surfacing for this year's race for Erie County executive, I couldn't be more shocked to hear that James Keane has announced his candidacy for the office.

In recent newspaper articles Keane has touted that he is the former deputy county executive under Dennis Gorski. Keane must recognize that Gorski didn't leave office by choice; he was voted out of office. One of the major reasons he lost to Joel Giambra in 1999 was that the Gorski administration consis-

tently taxed the homeowners of Erie County.

When Giambra was elected to office one of the first things he did was cut Erie County's portion of our property tax by 30 percent.

Presently our taxes still aren't as high as they were when Gorski and Keane ran county government.

Now Keane is promising to return services to the way they were before the Giambra administration. Keane, not having a financial background, can only achieve this promise by raising our property taxes. This would send Erie County back 10 years

(Please turn to page six)

Judicial system towers over Western New York

One of the nice things about being out of the area recently, besides missing last week's weather, was also missing all the coverage and hype of Super Bowl XLI.

One of the bad things about coming home, besides experiencing this week's weather, is being back in the midst of one of the things you've known, but the depths of which perhaps haven't truly been appreciated, about Buffalo Niagara.

When our Founding Fathers conceived their ideal government, central to virtually every decision was the idea of checks and balances. Attempting to ensure that just enough, but not too much, power would be vested in each point of their carefully conceived leadership triangle, the legislative, executive and judicial branches were thought to be, at least in a practical sense, equals.

Not here, where legislative and executive functions have been reduced to residing next to half eaten french fries and used Styrofoam coffee cups in the nearest convenience store Dumpster. Buffalo Niagara has become, and in retrospect has been for years now, the land of legislation by barristers and gavel bangers, where only a lawyer leads and everyone else heeds.

Being out of town, it's easy to keep up on the local happenings. In the space of seven days, I perused Internet reports of lawsuits that hope to keep George Holt in office, hope to keep local hospitals open, hope to stop an Indian casino from being built in Buffalo, threw out a five-year bid for sports equipment in Buffalo city schools and determined that indeed, our unelected county control board is in charge here, not lawmakers who long ago gave up that right with their combination of indifference, insolence and artificial indignation.

In the name of Rodney King, can't we all just get along? Joel Giambra has run to the courtroom so often — casinos, control boards and county clerks just to count a few of his favorite courtroom companions — perhaps he could help out the county coffers by signing an endorsement deal with Converse. Earlier this year, dispensing with any niceties, his opening sentence announcing another suit against the Seneca Buffalo casino read, "Good morning. I want to welcome my fellow plaintiffs."

Just think how much better off Buffalo schools would be, for example, if self-anointed superheroes Phil Rumore and James Williams spent more time finding ways to improve kids' education rather than hurling lumps of kryptonite at each other?

Why couldn't any leader in the Erie County Legislature shed the shackles of political correctness and pressure George Holt to simply do the decent thing, or is there that little decency that remains?

How rooted in reality is St. Joseph Hospital's President James McDonald when in announcing a decision to appeal a lost court case over the facility's potentially forced closing, he calls his operation an "efficient and vibrant part of the health care delivery system in Western New York." St. Joe's may be the Mayo Clinic, but if our medical setup is efficient and vibrant why do hospitals have to buy advertising space on hockey arena dasher boards to justify their existence and drum up

business? To believe there is anything even remotely streamlined or healthy about how we dispense our care, McDonald must also have palm trees growing on his farm.

Obviously, the judicial system has its time and place in governing the masses. But while most leaders view court cases as a rest stop on the road to rational recourse, Erie County proudly wears its crown as the champion repository of redress. Should Buffalo ever host a Super Bowl (details of a downtown domed stadium aside), there will be someone, somewhere nearby ready to serve papers challenging the validity of heads versus tails.

"The authority did not act prematurely or arbitrarily," a judge wrote last week in upholding the powers of the Erie County Fiscal Stability Authority.

Unlike those at the remaining two points of the local government hierarchy who constantly decide a courtroom is a better place to leave such decisions than a meeting room, perhaps we should be grateful at least the control board and judge were willing to act at all.

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers of Western New York. Opinions expressed here are the author's.)



BRIAN ACKLEY

Political Columnist

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Last week's question:

Do you think Altemio Sanchez would have a fair trial in Erie County?

You said:

88% YES 12% NO

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Increased STAR tax cuts top 2007 state budget priorities

New Yorkers continue to pay some of the highest property taxes in the nation. Property taxes in New York have gone up more than 60 percent in the past 10 years and are 28 percent higher than the national average.

Our "highest-in-the-nation" property tax status is the main reason why Western New York continues to lose jobs and population to other less taxing states.

Given that sad reality, Gov. Eliot Spitzer's first budget proposal released at the state capitol last week contains a welcome proposal that would dramatically expand the STAR property tax cut program for homeowners and seniors in our community.

I have long been a champion of the STAR program to help ease the burden of the high school taxes we pay here in Amherst, and I was a big proponent of the STAR property tax rebate checks approved by the state Legislature last year.

This year, Gov. Spitzer is proposing a huge expansion of the successful STAR program. It's a solid proposal and deserves a close look as a top priority in budget negotiations this year.

Currently, the average STAR tax savings in Erie County is \$526 per year. Under the governor's proposal, middle class homeowners with an adjusted gross income of \$60,000 or less would see their STAR tax savings rise to \$947 — an increase of 80 percent over this year's levels.

Higher income homeowners would also see an increase in their STAR benefit, although the increases will be less as incomes go up along a sliding scale.

Even with the sliding income scale, top of the scale earners who make up to \$235,000 would still see a 30 percent increased property tax cut. Seniors will also see dramatic increases in their STAR tax cut, and the recently enacted Senior STAR cost-of-living adjustment will be made permanent.

Because the property tax burden falls most heavily on middle class homeowners and seniors on a fixed income, there is much merit in the governor's plan.

Cutting the underlying costs that are the cause of high property tax bills (including our highest in the nation Medicaid spending and unfunded Albany mandates) must also be implemented to help grow the Western New York economy.

This year's process has just begun and although this STAR proposal is a solid step in the right direction, no governor's proposal is ever automatically approved by the Legislature.

There will be many opportunities for public input and negotiations leading up to the adoption of a final budget for fiscal year 2007-08 by the April 1 deadline.

During the next four weeks, in my capacity as the ranking member of the Ways & Means Committee, I will be leading a series of bipartisan public hearings in Albany on this STAR proposal and every other area of the governor's budget proposal.

I welcome your thoughts and ideas about this year's budget process and would be happy to hear from you. E-mail hayesj@assembly.state.ny.us or call my office in Amherst at 634-1895.



JAMES P. HAYES

New York State Assembly