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Collins leads regionalism to a dead end

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Forget about a larger vision of our shared destiny. Perish any thought of smaller, streamlined government.

Erase any idea that the guy at the top will do anything about our multitude of villages and towns; about our overpopulation of mayors, superintendents and trustees; about the separate highway departments, school districts, police chiefs and chief bottle washers that drive up our taxes and end our vision at each backyard fence.

The common sense of consolidations, the merit of village/town mergers, the notion that we are all in this together — all of it flew out the window when Chris Collins walked in the door.

The head of our regional government does not much care about regionalism. The county executive confirmed it this week. His first budget undid the county's landmark takeover of city parks. What was supposed to be a first step toward dismantling the wall between city and county instead became the last stop. The county has its parks department. The city will have to re-tool its.

We are back to the days when Tony Masiello and Dennis Gorski acted like the city and county were on separate planets. Their current counterparts, Byron Brown and Collins, share the same go-it-alone sentiment that has gotten us nowhere.

Brown believes that America's third-poorest city can stand on its own. The illusion will dissolve when the coming recession prompts Albany to pull away the crutches of state aid that hold Buffalo upright.

Collins acts as if Buffalo — with nearly a third of the county's residents— is somehow not part of his domain. The parks deal, settled four years ago under Joel Giambra, acknowledged the obvious: The city could not keep up pools and playgrounds in its multitude of poor neighborhoods.

Collins said the county is doing a bad job in city parks and got a raw deal. But instead of reworking it, he will pull the plug.

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Giambra had plenty of faults, but he saw the problem of overstuffed government in an underperforming region. He used his office to push for everything from consolidations to a city-county merger.

Civic leader Kevin Gaughan's recent study revealed a county with far more politicians than most other places, at a taxpayer cost of some \$32 million. Gaughan is on a countywide crusade to cut the number of town and village trustees. As a businessman, Collins is all about efficiency. But the concept does not extend to leaner local government, apart from lip service. Although Collins backs a push to downsize the County Legislature, it is as much for political as philosophical reasons.

"I wish [Gaughan] well in his efforts," Collins said. "But it's not for me . . . to dictate to the cities, towns and villages how to run their shop."

Collins is a bright guy who can reel off budget numbers. But I think he has a blank spot when it comes to a bigger picture. Granted, he has a financial control board looking over his shoulder — for reasons I have trouble understanding, given the county's stability. But the virtues of consolidations and cutting government down to size — from cost savings to clearer shared vision — are hard to dispute.

As head of our regional government, Collins ought to be leading the shared-services, smaller-government charge. Instead, he is running the other way.

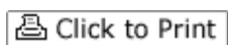
"Unless you deal with the problem of oversized government, you're whistling past the graveyard," Gaughan said. "We keep losing population and the ability to deliver services."

Now Collins is pulling the county out of the city's parks. If we keep jumping backwards, we will never get ahead.

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