

The Taxpayer Revolt—The Community Responds

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by Paulette Peterson

As I have been recruiting restaurants and vendors for the Free Buffalo fundraiser being held on May 28th at the Central Terminal, I have been struck by the response of the people I have encountered. When I explain that we are part of the taxpayer revolt and that we sincerely want to help move this area forward there is an almost palpable sigh of relief that finally someone is “doing something” From secretaries and receptionists, to business managers and business owners the responses have been immediate, passionate and altogether similar. Everyone knows that “something” needs to be done and everyone truly wants “something” to be done. Everyone is glad that someone is stepping forward to do “something”. No one is really sure what that “something” is. Everyone wishes us luck, they truly feel that “nothing” can be done because of the power structure in this area. They are convinced that a small group of politicians control everything.

One East Side business owner expressed exasperation at the taxes and fees he has to pay annually to run a small, family restaurant. A Cheektowaga restaurant and bar owner lamented the fact that his business has decreased by almost two thirds since the state imposed the smoking ban (despite the misleading and biased news report this week that businesses have not suffered since the ban started). A woman who is involved in a community action organization explained to me that she would not mind paying taxes so much if she at least saw some positive results for her money. When I called one local business about supplies, the receptionist who answered the phone complained vigorously about the county controller not having paid her taxes. Another young receptionist told me she is leaving the area because she just cannot find a really good paying job. A bartender told me her kids have left town and have gone to North Carolina, of course. The fascinating part is that these responses cut across all age groups, all races, all financial standings and all of the neighborhoods of the greater Buffalo area.

Everyone—every single person—has expressed disgust at the current condition of local government. They are shocked that things have declined to such an embarrassing state of affairs. Sadly, everyone I have spoken to has expressed profound skepticism that things will ever get better. They are convinced that the corruption and lack of leadership is so deeply entrenched in the fabric of this community that we can never dig our way out of it. They are right to be pessimistic.

How excited we used to get when this great project or that was announced to the media. The sketches were on the front page of the Buffalo News! We were shown the latest new magic bullet needed to fix Buffalo. Remember the numerous waterfront development proposals depicting beautiful landscapes, complete with people bustling in and out of restaurants and shops? Remember the domed waterfront amusement park, the waterfront zoo, the new bridge between Buffalo and Canada, and of course the casino? How can we assure these area taxpayers that we really mean to make a difference in light of what has been?

First, we have to maintain the zeal we felt during the height of the Erie County budget crisis. While it is impossible to maintain that level of emotion over extended periods of time, we can still remain committed to Free Buffalo! The problems that exist and the issues that need to be studied are huge, and they have been so pervasive for so long that they simply cannot be addressed in a matter of weeks. It has only been a few months since the "revolution" began and it has a long way to go.

Second, we have got to remember that we are in this together. Egos and personal agendas have no place in a revolt such as this one. The old cliché that says "united we stand, divided we fall" is so true. Unity is critical to the achievement of our common goals. Many management training sessions espouse the use of a common enemy to unite a group to work together. It is a very effective technique. We have a common purpose if not a common enemy. In any large group of intelligent, fervent people there will always be philosophical differences. The cause of government reform is so large and has such breadth that there is plenty of room for many viewpoints. What will make this movement strong and successful is the willingness to share ideas and listen to these various perspectives with respect and some degree of professionalism and class. The nasty tone and personal comments being expressed in some of the area's discussion forums on the internet do not convey the allegedly common purpose of helping Buffalo. Rather they smack of an unwillingness to hear free thought, competitiveness and much of the same old, same old.

Third, people who care have to step forward and do their part. There are so many ways to make this thing a success. Whether the contribution is money or manpower, it is needed, not only for the fundraiser but afterwards as well. People who expressed a desire to help at the first two meetings are needed now more than ever. Everyone is busy living their lives and trying to earn enough money to pay their taxes but hopefully some time can be made to further the cause and show support for the movement.

The people who have signed on to be a part of this fundraiser or to help make it a success have done so for one unifying reason—hope. They are tired of hopelessness, they are tired of empty promises, they are tired of being mired in a government that regulates us to death and they are tired of watching this area lose population. The people are desperate for new answers. They are helping out because the cause is so very important.

It is a huge challenge but this is the moment to embrace it. No other opportunity like this may ever present itself again.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men, Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat. And we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.”