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COMMENTARY

Rod Watson: Collins' take on the city is perplexing

By Rod Watson

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When it comes to recognizing the importance of Buffalo to Erie County, which is the real Chris Collins?

The one who showed up at the Buffalo Urban League banquet to signal his interest in the urban core, who made it a point to sit down with the Black Leadership Forum, and who made inner-city youth programs the first recipients of the salary he's donating to civic groups?

Or is it the one seeking a share of the city's casino revenue, who nixed plans to build up the downtown college campus, and who still might try eventually to rewrite the sales tax agreement in ways some fear would shrink Buffalo's share?

The two faces of Collins — who marked his 100th day as county executive Wednesday — are of interest to more than just students of schizophrenia. They also have import for anyone who believes in regionalism.

Collins says he's a true believer. "We will never have a vibrant region without a vibrant city," he adds.

Those are reassuring words. It's the actions that raise doubts.

Taken individually, he can come up with an explanation for each decision. He notes that 70 percent of county residents live outside Buffalo, yet he seeks only half the casino revenue from a "regional asset" at a time the city says that it's fiscally stable. He adds that he proposes spending that money on Buffalo's culturals.

He's also quick to point out that the county — not the city — subsidizes the big arts institutions and is paying to tear down the Aud, and says any sales tax rewrite would not be based solely on population shifts.

And what about killing plans to turn Erie Community College's City Campus into a regional attraction?

Collins insists that part-time students with jobs won't travel far to attend a downtown campus and that the county can't afford it, anyway.

"People want more. I have a single question: Find me the money. It doesn't exist," he said.



Of course, there are good arguments on the other side of each of those issues. For instance, Buffalo claims the casino money on the grounds that it alone will bear the police, fire and infrastructure costs.

But aside from the pros and cons of each individual stance, it's the bigger picture that's concerning.

"Chris Collins' challenge is not to think that the county must help the city, but to understand that the city *is* the county," said civic activist Kevin Gaughan. "People do not move to a region because the suburbs are nice; the suburbs are nice everywhere." People move to a region, he said, for a "vibrant, culturally diverse central city . . . that's alive, that's functional, that acts as the 'living room' for the region."

Gaughan mentioned places such as Pittsburgh, Chattanooga, Tenn., and Portland, Ore. He doesn't see that kind of vision here. Neither does Henry L. Taylor Jr., director of the Center for Urban Studies at the University at Buffalo.

"It's still the idea that you grow the county and things trickle down to the city and the urban areas," Taylor said. "The regional vision has got to be a vision that's anchored by a strategy to redevelop the most underdeveloped parts of the region, . . . and we're not seeing that."

Of course, Collins faces a political reality that none of the regionalists do: He has to run — and most voters live — outside the city.

But as both a bottom-line businessman and someone who carried every municipality except Buffalo, he might have the political capital to bring suburbanites around. He has a chance to make them see that, in his words, "As the city goes, so goes the county."

In the next few hundred days, it's time to spend that capital, not just look for ways to balance an admittedly tight county budget.

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