

## **Lesson our politicians can learn from Buffalo: Don't do what we did; Buffalo remains a political and economic basket case with half the population it had in 1960.**

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### **Document Text**

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Pittsburgh or Buffalo? Pondering the possibility of a future without steel, Hamilton leaders would do well to study the successes and failures from each of those nearby Rust Belt cities. Both places lost massive steel industries more than a generation ago and responded in radically different ways.

When regional chair, I befriended two visionary political leaders from those cities, former Erie County Executive Joel Giambra and former Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy. They taught me about the challenge of governing a declining city in urban America -- a tougher job than here because of crime and racial discord.

Giambra and Murphy were successful municipal politicians who courageously challenged the status quo, trying to improve the fortunes of their communities. Murphy drove \$4.5 billion in controversial downtown development, much of it on land reclaimed from former steel mills. Giambra attempted to eliminate city-county duplication and faced a fierce backlash from turf-protecting local politicians.

As change agents, both politicians became lightning rods for voter discontent, and each ultimately paid a price at the polls. I spoke to both of them this week to gather their thoughts. This column will focus on Buffalo's rather demoralizing experience. In my next piece I will explore Pittsburgh's more encouraging example.

I have a soft spot for Buffalo, notwithstanding its history of self-inflicted wounds. Like many Hamiltonians of my age, I grew up watching Buffalo television stations and cheering for its sports teams.

Buffalo today is as beautiful as it is blighted. Its remarkable Frederick Law Olmstead-designed park system connects an urban fabric that boasts many spectacular buildings by giants of American architecture such as Frank Lloyd Wright. It has the world renowned Albright-Knox Art Gallery, a vibrant cultural scene and some great neighbourhoods.

But fully 50 years after the St. Lawrence Seaway opened, effectively bypassing Buffalo as a shipping hub, and 35 years after its steel companies closed, the city remains a political and economic basket case with half the population it had in 1960, and more people leaving every day.

While local politicians had no control over the fate of the Seaway or the steel mills, their failure to respond collaboratively compounded the problems. Giambra believes infighting between city and suburbs prevented a co-ordinated regional approach to planning and economic development.

Suburban communities focused on poaching businesses from the old City of Buffalo while building sprawling low-density neighbourhoods that effectively segregate upper-middle-class whites by race and income from the urban areas they fled.

High commercial taxes drove remaining businesses away, while discouraging new industries.

The hollowing out of Buffalo accelerated when they built a new university campus and an NFL football stadium in distant suburbs. They constructed an LRT/subway system, but parochial politics guaranteed its failure by dead-ending the line at the city limits, preventing it from connecting to the university and high-growth employment areas in the suburbs.

Buffalo built a waterfront expressway that undermined stable neighbourhoods and disconnected the community from the natural beauty of Lake Erie. They squabbled for years about how to improve capacity at the Peace Bridge while frustrated tourists and exporters took their business elsewhere.

In fairness to a few enlightened leaders such as Giambra, there have been recent bright spots for Buffalo. Efforts at heritage preservation have helped to resuscitate some local tourism.

A great downtown ballpark and arena, a lively theatre district and some funky local shopping areas are all contributing to a sense that there is still hope for Buffalo.

But unfortunately for the long-suffering citizens of Buffalo, most of the learning to be had for Hamilton's political leadership is a cautionary tale in what not to do.

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### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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