

COMMENTARY

Nightmare over for arts; challenges lie ahead



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Published: November 13, 2011, 12:00 AM

Relief. That's the feeling in the air five days after Erie County residents voted County Executive Chris Collins out of office and chose Comptroller Mark Poloncarz as his replacement.

For the cultural community of Western New York, it marks the end of a protracted nightmare in which a single vindictive politician threatened the momentum of a growing cultural movement.

In the end, that momentum caused his demise. Tuesday's vote was a repudiation of Collins for many reasons, not least of which was his decision last year to commit political suicide by withholding a relative pittance from county arts organizations and libraries. That decision never had a thing to do with money, but was part and parcel of a dangerous philosophy designed to keep the public IQ at nonthreatening levels.

Certainly, a celebration on the order of that famous "Wizard of Oz" song is warranted.

But, now in order for the Collins nightmare to give way to new reality for the arts under the much more promising Poloncarz, that relief must soon give way to resolve. It's the Emerald City the arts should be after, and the journey is not going to be easy.

A return to the status quo as it existed before Collins declared war on culture cannot be an option.

The cultural community, if it hopes to capitalize on Poloncarz's win, must pour all its efforts into a grand new plan, with public policy as just one element, to move forward. It has to include a

way to fairly and equitably fund arts groups and to ensure that the halls of government, including in Albany and City Hall, are all genuinely behind them.

That effort also has to forge deeper connections with Visit Buffalo Niagara and other tourist agencies to ensure that the region's cultural vitality—from groups large and small—becomes truly integrated into the region's national image and brand. It has to make arts *seem to matter* as much as they actually do.

From the looks of it, that project is well under way.

The great cultural funding crisis of 2010-11, while extremely painful for the entire regional arts community, brought that community closer together than ever before. There's nothing like a common enemy to catalyze a movement.

The dark days of the Collins Junta also turbo-charged what had been an extremely slow and deliberate process to advance the concerns of that community under a unified front.

That nearly decadelong effort culminated earlier this year in the formation of the clinically named Arts Services Initiative, a group that aims to unite the cultural apparatus of Western New York's eight counties and to weave the concerns of culture into the political and economic arenas.

Its new leader, former Music Is Art director Tod Kniazuk, was appointed in mid-October. With experience in the halls of Erie County government, he seems to acknowledge the challenges ahead. And he's not about to declare victory just yet.

"This is a good first step. This gets us back in the game," Kniazuk said, adding that a dedicated funding stream for the arts is a priority for the group. But that's not all he's after.

"We're interested not just in monetary issues," he continued. "We're interested in having the cultural sector be included in conversations about the economy in this region. We're interested in being at the table when regional leaders are brought together to talk about issues of importance to the region, whether they're culturally based or not. We really want to take our rightful place at the table as an important part of this region and this economy."

From the sounds of it, Kniazuk and the nascent ASI are headed in precisely the right direction. With the right combination of smarts and vision—and with some actual cooperation from County Hall—the destination is within sight.

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