

# Choolokian: We've fallen a long way but we can recover



**Glenn Choolokian**

The city of Niagara Falls is home to a world famous natural attraction that draws more than four million annual visitors from around the world annually. We have a renowned hydroelectric facility that powers a large part of the US and Canada. Located on the world's longest, undefended international border, we're only a stone's throw away from 20 percent of the continental US population. We also host a very successful downtown casino.

Yet, with all of these positives, our city is broke.

What happened? With all of these natural and manmade blessings, how has our city gone so wrong and become so broke?

**Missed management:**

Niagara Falls is the municipal equivalent of the lottery winners we frequently read about: the people who are lucky enough to scratch off a fortune but end up empty handed due to their foolishness. We didn't plan to fail but we obviously did fail to plan.

The administration's "spending plan" was just that: spend and spend more. As the casino cash dried up, it continued to commit to projects, consultants and plans while hoping the casino problem would be resolved to our advantage. That problem is no where near being resolved and when the smoke clears it could mean zero dollars for Niagara Falls.

What if we get zero as a result of the arbitration? What if we are fortunate enough to get the \$58 million we're owed, but zero dollars after that? What if we get none of what we're owed and nothing for the remaining years of the casino compact? Any of these scenarios are possible.

We broke a key law of investment by failing to pay ourselves. We paid the consultants and the vendors while failing to set aside some of the casino windfall for our city. Those lottery winners that turn into losers are

our cousins.

**Broke and a joke:**

How bad are our city's finances? They're so bad that the Mayor has found it necessary to go hat in hand to the Power Authority to convert our city's 44 year, \$850,000 annuity to a one time payout of \$13,450,000. It's a terrible deal. So terrible that at the November 13 public budget hearing our residents agreed it was a bad deal by expressing frustration and anger at the spending of the casino cash and the NYPA bail out plan.

The state gave away 52 prime acres of our downtown to the Seneca Nation. The state lures and then traps our visitors inside the Reservation State Park and hangs onto the millions in parking fees that go along with it. The State/NYPA grows rich by selling our hydroelectric power. The State challenges the Seneca Nation over the definition of casino gaming and we're trapped by the squabble. Now we're broke and the butt of jokes.

**Moving forward:**

The Mayor gave his proposed 2013 budget to the Council thirty days late. And while we were in the process of considering budget recommendations to stop the tax increase, keep city

services and retain jobs, he placed the NYPA proposal on the table. The NYPA deal as drawn is a non-starter. The Council cannot agree to a loan gimmick that damages our city's finances for the next 44 years. We're in bad shape financially but to agree to this plan would be irresponsible on the part of Council.

The City Council is presently finalizing its 2013 budget for presentation to the Mayor. We're confident that our plan will return city services, stop layoffs and reduce the Mayor's large tax increase for homeowners and businesses. It will also eliminate the need for the NYPA scheme. We encourage the Mayor to negotiate with the Council in a spirit of cooperation and with the best interests of the city at heart.

Hopeless and helpless are two words that aren't in my vocabulary. Our city has good people and tremendous potential, so I know we can do better. We have to do better because the alternatives are a bankrupt city and the end of Niagara Falls as we know it.

*Niagara Falls City Councilman Glenn Choolokian resides in Niagara Falls with his wife and two children.*



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