

The City of Buffalo, New York Common Council Action Plan for Fiscal Year 2005-2006

**Thursday
April 7, 2005
11:00 am
Room 1417 City Hall**

Common Council Members

**Dominic J. Bonifacio, Jr.
Brian C. Davis
Richard A. Fontana
Bonnie E. Russell**

**Marc A. Coppola
David A. Franczyk
Joseph Golombek, Jr.
Antoine M. Thompson**

MISSION STATEMENT

“To improve the quality of life within the City of Buffalo for its taxpayers, businesses, residents and visitors, while transforming and rebuilding the City into a vibrant and growing home-ownership, business, education and entertainment hub within Erie County and the Western New York Region.”

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PUBLIC SAFETY INITIATIVES

- **Have Police Officers “Walk the Beat”**

At Block Club and Business Association meetings, the public continually advances the idea of having police officers “walk the beat”. The visible presence of police officers is a deterrent for criminal activity and provides a feeling of safety for law-abiding citizens. In 1999, the Town of Cheektowaga obtained a \$25,000 HUD grant to institute foot patrols in three target areas of Cheektowaga.

The Council will seek to have dedicated foot patrols or at the very least, having officers, as part of their regular shift, park their cars and walk the neighborhood for a period of time. The Buffalo Police Department should explore the possibility of obtaining grants, if necessary, to bring about foot patrols.

- **Clean Sweep Crime Crack Downs**

Working together as a joint task, federal, state, county and city police agencies have conducted highly successful sting/sweep operations resulting in a large number of arrests and prosecutions. A combined and focused effort to utilize our available resources to combat criminal activity benefits area residents and businesses and encourages visitors and redevelopment.

The Council fully supports these cooperative crime-reducing efforts and encourages their continuance and expansion. This is an important quality of life issue for the western New York region.

- **Surveillance Cameras**

The Council supports placing surveillance cameras in strategic public locations as a tool to deter and combat criminal activity. Many cities across the country are utilizing surveillance cameras with much success. The Council has submitted a list of potential camera locations to the Police Department and while progress has been made in discussing this item with the Police Department, cameras have not yet been installed.

The Council considers the use of surveillance cameras to be a high-priority item and is seeking a commitment and timetable for camera installation.

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- **Drug Asset Forfeiture Community Fund**

The Police Department obtains significant dollars through the seizure of assets maintained by drug dealers. Funds from drug seized assets are used to provide necessary equipment and training to police officers. The Council believes that a portion of drug seizure funds need to be directed to community organizations that provide anti-drug education and/or activities for youth. This initiative would hopefully prevent and/or deter criminal activity thus serving as a very important drug education and crime reduction tool.

Other cities take a portion of drug seizure funds and through a community board of directors, provide competitive grants to community organizations that provide drug education or crime prevention services. The Council strongly supports and encourages the City administration to develop a similar program within the City of Buffalo.

- **Quality of Life Ordinance Enforcement**

Quality of life issues are the complaints that we most frequently receive as Council members. To draw attention to quality of life concerns, the Council as part of its 2004 Action Plan, requested that the Buffalo Police Department file on a monthly basis, the number of citations issued for violations of the City Noise and Illegal Dumping Ordinances. The numbers provided reflect a lack of enforcement on these quality of life issues.

The Council will continue to draw attention to quality of life Ordinance enforcement in the hope that the Police Department will place a greater emphasis on such violations.

- **Open School Buildings to the Community**

With cuts in funding to community agencies that provide educational and recreational services, we must increase collaborative efforts within our school system. Schools should be open to the public during after school hours for community use; however current Labor Contract provisions make this difficult and costly.

This year all of the School Districts union contracts are up for renegotiation. We must take advantage of the opportunity to make changes to school contracts to facilitate programs that open schools during evening hours for greater use by residents and the community.

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HOUSING INITIATIVES

- **Increase the Rate of Demolitions for Vacant & Abandoned Properties**

As of December 2004 there were over 800 vacant properties awaiting demolition in the City of Buffalo that adversely affect the quality of life of neighboring residents every day. Vacant properties are an eyesore, attract criminal activity and quickly become a fire hazard. Additional funds must be identified to address this serious issue.

Legislation is pending in the State Legislature which would allow the city greater flexibility in using bond funds for demolitions. The Council memorialized a resolution and traveled to Albany to express support for and encourage the passage of legislation sponsored by Senator Stachowski and Assembly Majority Leader Tokasz.

- **Allow Potential Owner Occupants the First Opportunity to Bid on Properties Being Sold at City Auctions**

Too many properties sold at City foreclosure auctions are ending up in the hands of individuals seeking to make a quick buck by “flipping” properties at inflated prices to unsuspecting buyers. In some instances individuals who are seeking an affordable property to reside in, are competing with absentee investors who are more concerned with making money than maintaining the property; this affects the quality of life for everyone.

The Council supports an initiative to allow individuals interested in becoming owner occupants to have the chance to bid first on foreclosed properties. However, the Corporation Counsel has advised the Council that changes to state law would be necessary to allow potential owner occupants the opportunity to bid first on properties. The Council has traveled to the State Legislature requesting the respective changes in state law and will continue efforts to bring about such a change.

- **Expand Down Payment Closing Cost Assistance Program**

Increasing the number of homeowners in the City is critical to the future success of Buffalo. Additional dollars and increased effort needs to be focused on increasing homeownership in the City. Due to the City’s past mismanagement of HUD dollars,

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Buffalo could not access funds for down payment assistance to potential homeowners last year.

Now that HUD's freeze on HOME funds has been removed, the Council will closely monitor the City's down payment assistance program and encouraging its expansion.

- **Extend New York State Homesteading Law**

The City of Buffalo has approximately five thousand (5,000) vacant lots, many of which are eyesores due to the difficulty and cost of maintaining so many properties. There are restrictions on Cities that prevent them from simply gifting public property to individuals. The State however, enacted Homesteading legislation authorizing cities to give vacant lots to adjacent property owners, so long as the owner agrees to maintain the vacant lot. Through the Homesteading Program, hundreds of property owners have accepted adjacent vacant lots for increased yard space, or for adding garages and swimming pools, and to improve the investment in their property. Sadly, the Homesteading legislation has recently expired and needs to be extended by the State for the City to continue its efforts to reduce the number of vacant lots it must maintain.

The Council supports and encourages our State legislators to renew the Homesteading legislation and will continue lobbying efforts to bring about such a change.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

- **Finalize Bass Pro Agreement**

The Council supports Bass Pro coming to Buffalo to build a mega-outdoor store in the Inner Harbor renovation area. As a statement of support, the Council approved a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding that established a general framework for the Bass Pro project.

The Council encourages swift action by all parties involved and looks forward to an in-depth review and approval of the acquisition and construction agreements and related ground breaking for the new Bass Pro Outdoor store, and adjacent Great Lakes Historical Museum and Intermodal Transportation Center.

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- **Increase State Empire Zone Wage Tax Credit**

Companies that locate within an Empire Development Zone are able to receive assistance with property and sales taxes, investment and wage tax credits, and low cost power. From a business perspective, tax incentives and assistance due to our above average taxes, is very appealing to developers. Correspondingly, the city benefits by attracting new business and residents hopefully benefit from new employment opportunities. Notwithstanding, wage tax credits should be improved to induce Empire Zone based business to hire City residents. Bringing businesses to Buffalo is important and necessary, however we need to do more to encourage businesses to hire City residents.

The Council supports and encourages the State to increase wage tax credits for businesses that hire workers who reside in distressed cities such as Buffalo.

- **Get Small Business Loans Out to Neighborhood Businesses**

The Council was disappointed to learn that the CARE small business loan program which was allocated \$1,600,000 million dollars of Community Development Block Grant Year 30 funding, did not complete a single small business loan last year.

The complete lack of these incentive loans for an entire year is completely unacceptable and the Council will be monitoring this program closely this year.

- **Bring a Casino to Buffalo**

A majority of the Council supports bringing a casino to Buffalo as an economic development initiative. Besides creating new construction, operation and management jobs, a new casino would compliment the City's on-going efforts to recreate itself as vibrant and dynamic, and help to shed the image of a decaying rust-belt region.

The Council continues its efforts to establish a dialogue with the Seneca Nation as a catalyst to locating a Casino in Buffalo.

- **Peace Bridge Expansion Project**

The Council continues to play an active role in the on-going Peace Bridge expansion project. Additional funding will be sought to improve numerous properties saved from demolition and to restore adjacent parklands. These and future efforts will improve

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access routes to and from the Peace Bridge crossing, help to preserve the culture and heritage of Buffalo's West Side, and improve the quality of life for residents, business and visitors using this gateway.

IMPROVE CITY FINANCES

- **Appoint a Procurement Policy Board**

The City Charter Section 10-30 mandates that a Procurement Policy Board consisting of up to seven members be established. The Board is to include individuals appointed by the Mayor, the Buffalo Board of Education, the Buffalo Sewer Authority, and the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority.

As outlined in the City Charter the purpose of the Board is to establish 1) policies designed to encourage cooperative purchasing, 2) policies with respect to the methods for soliciting bids, proposals and awarding contracts, 3) standards and procedures to be used in determining whether vendors are responsible and 4) policies governing the manner in which agencies shall administer contracts and oversee the performance of contracts and contractors.

The Council urges the immediate creation of the Procurement Policy Board and encourages initiatives that will reduce costs through the use of joint purchasing contracts, establish a more efficient procurement process, ensure greater participation by minority and women owned businesses, and provide equal access to business opportunities with the City and its allied agencies.

- **Continue Dog Enforcement Effort**

Thousands of dogs are not licensed in the City as required by City Ordinance. Last year the Council implemented a door to door effort through the City Clerk's Office to increase dog licensing. In a few short weeks this door to door effort saw the City issue approximately 3,200 new dog licenses and brought in additional revenues of approximately \$39,950.

Given the success of this initiative, the Council will be seeking to conduct and expand another dog licensing effort this year.

- **Merge Sewer and Water Operations**

A great deal of public discussion has occurred regarding the consolidation and merger of stand-alone government entities. Until now, the focus has been on

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mergers between the City and the County. The Council believes that there are internal consolidations and mergers that should be investigated which could possibly lead to cost savings and improved management.

The Council is currently exploring the possibility of merging the Buffalo Municipal Water Finance Authority, the Water Board and the Buffalo Sewer Authority. A merger of water and sewer operations would hopefully result in a new combined operation that could reduce rates and operate more efficiently due to a combined work effort and the elimination of duplicated services.

- **Accept Partial Tax Payments**

Many property taxpayers have a difficult time paying in full, the semi-annual installments of their City tax bill. If a taxpayer forwards a partial payment, the City will not and cannot accept the partial payment. Due to the City's fiscal situation, we should never turn away funds that are being offered, even if only as a partial payment.

The County of Erie amended the County Charter to authorize the acceptance of partial tax payments. The Council will seek to do the same by amending the City Charter this year to provide for the acceptance of partial tax payments.

- **Identify City Debts and Violations Prior to Issuing Zoning Approvals**

Prior to any individual being appointed to any City employment, Board or Agency, a record check is done to determine that the individual has fully paid their tax, water or user fee payments and that no City violations are pending. However, a similar check is not done prior to granting approval for any zoning applications.

The Council is seeking to address this situation by requiring as part of the zoning application/approval process, that a record check be performed to determine whether the applicant has any City account arrearages and/or violations pending, and that such items be resolved prior to zoning application approval.

- **Join U. S. Communities Government Purchasing Alliance**

Many cities across the country are benefiting from the U.S. Communities Government Purchasing Alliance. This national cooperative purchasing program offers significant savings on a variety of products and supplies used by all levels of

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government. The purchasing cooperative is sponsored by the National League of Cities to allow towns, villages, cities, counties and schools to piggyback on national contracts bid competitively by other local governments.

The Council has memorialized and continues to support and encourage the passage of pending State Legislation to provide municipalities the option of joining the U. S. Communities Government Purchasing Alliance.

- **Develop a Recycling Education Plan**

Recycling is important from an environmental perspective and from a financial perspective as well. Recycling reduces our reliance on the use of garbage landfills and correspondingly decreases the amount of fees the City must pay to dispose of garbage, while generating new revenue for the City. Last year, under the terms of the recycling contract with BFI, the City received \$45,000 in recycling revenue.

Currently the City recycles only 6.6% of its garbage. Increased recycling efforts by City residents will result in greater financial benefit to the City and less of a reliance on ratepayer charges to fund operations. As part of their recycling contract, BFI pays the City \$75,000 for marketing and education efforts to encourage residents to recycle.

The Council supports and encourages the Administration to expand its marketing initiatives and education plans in an effort to increase recycling, the revenue realized therefrom, and to decrease landfill costs borne by city residents.

- **Greater Cooperation with City Administration**

It seems that items of importance are often placed before the Council at the latest hour possible, with a demand for immediate approval due to deadlines associated with the matter. When the Council conducts the due diligence that it should prior to voting to establish approval, we are often portrayed as being obstructionists, petty, etc. For the sake of conducting the City's business efficiently and properly, it would be of great assistance if the council could be brought into discussions earlier. Recent examples of where earlier Council involvement would have been beneficial include the Community Development Block Grant Budget, the Ashbury Church and ArtSpace Projects, and most importantly, matters affecting the City Budget.

We as a Council request that the Administration include the Council or at a minimum, its representative, in discussions relating to a matter prior to the item being presented to the Council for its approval.

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- **Parks Advisory Board**

In an effort to save money and to regionalize the operation of area parks, the City, by inter-municipal agreement, transferred management of the City's Olmstead Park System to Erie County. The agreement calls for the establishment of an oversight committee to review the operation of the parks covered by the agreement. The committee as specified in the agreement is to include representatives of the respective administrations, legislative bodies and unions.

The Common Council is anxious to have this oversight committee established to ensure that all items of concern relating to City parks are being properly addressed and that taxpayers interests are served.

- **Establish Cost Centers in City Government**

The City faces the daily reality of diminished resources, increased operating costs, and the involvement of a State established Control Board.

Timely and accurate managerial and financial information is needed by City managers to, meet their Charter responsibilities, make sound business decisions and operate efficiently in the eyes of taxpayers and residents. The City has installed state-of-the-art financial and management computer software and has centralized the administration of intergovernmental services such as employee benefits, copier, cell phone, fuel and oil procurement and motor vehicle supplies and repair costs.

However, the City has not developed a system to "charge-back" costs to the respective department(s). The resulting environment discourages conservation and savings, since individual department results can not be determined without exhaustive research. Likewise, determining the true cost of an operation is difficult since information must be gathered from multiple departments, manual sources and competing software systems.

This Council requests that the Administration and the Comptroller undertake an in-depth review of City policies and procedures to ensure that the true cost of operation is reflected in the annual budget and year-end financial statements *separately for and within each respective City department*. This Council encourages efforts to centralize management decision-making practices provided an adequate and automated cost charge-back system is utilized.