



THE BUFFALO NEWS



Mayor Brown says Buffalo is 'turning a corner' in fight against poverty

By Brian Meyer

Updated: 08/31/07 7:35 AM

Mayor Byron W. Brown says he's painfully aware that Buffalo faces severe poverty. He also knows fixing the problem will require Herculean efforts by many entities.

But Brown makes no apologies for being an optimist even in the wake of new estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau showing that Buffalo is the second-poorest big city in the United States.

He insists his optimism is rooted in reality. In an interview with The Buffalo News Thursday, Brown and a few of his cabinet members highlighted more than a dozen trends and initiatives that they believe show a city that is "turning a corner."

Brown even suggested that conditions may have improved since the Census data was compiled in 2005 and 2006.

"There are so many positive things happening in the city that don't get the kind of coverage [negative stories] do," Brown said.

For example, city development officials have documented more than \$3.6 billion in projects that are in the planning stages, under construction or recently completed. Economic Development Commissioner Richard M. Tobe said the projects are sprouting up in all parts of the city and have the potential to create thousands of new jobs.

One project alone — Lakeside Commerce Park, which is being built on the Union Ship Canal site — is expected to create at least 2,000 jobs within five years.

But are they the kind of jobs that will really lift Buffalo's sagging economy? Kathryn A. Foster, director of the Regional Institute at the University at Buffalo, said the types of jobs that have emerged recently, including retail and casino jobs, are low-wage positions that haven't pushed up income levels.

Brown is convinced that will change.

"There will be more jobs in the medical sector with the expansion of the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, more management jobs and new jobs in other key sectors," Brown predicted.

He added that hardly a week goes by that the city doesn't receive some calls from businesses looking to relocate to Buffalo. Some factors that have helped nudge Buffalo onto the radar screen, he said, include a recent article in Forbes Magazine that ranked the city first when it comes to cost-of-living standards.

The mayor added that Buffalo is widely known as being one of the most affordable housing markets in the nation.

However, UB Professor Henry L. Taylor Jr. said just attracting business without having creative policies that link poor people to those jobs doesn't solve the problem of poverty. Taylor has long noted the disconnect between jobs and the people who need them, particularly in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

Poverty and wealth

"On the East Side, where poverty is concentrated, it's also where the highest percentage of wealth-producing industries are located. But the problem is there is no relationship between those jobs and wealth-producing industries, and the neighborhoods and communities around them," said Taylor, director of UB's Center for Urban Studies. "So the wealth being produced on the East Side is subsidizing every other section of the city, and we don't want to admit that, and we certainly don't want to fight for policies to change that."

Taylor said if the "millions of dollars we are spending on increased police protection, on the criminal justice system, and the welfare system" were put into innovative strategies that reach out and pull in poor people, "those resources could change the nature of the city."

"It's policy, not poverty, that is our great enemy," Taylor said.

While depicting Buffalo as the second-poorest big city in the nation, the new Census data also shows that the city's poverty rate increased —



from 26.6 percent in 2005, to 29.9 percent last year — while the national poverty rate fell slightly, to 12.3 percent. Buffalo's median household income of \$27,850 is the third lowest in the United States.

Still, Brown remains bullish on the city. He cited efforts to expand job training and placement services, and singled out the work of the Buffalo Employment and Training Center, a collaboration between the city and Erie County.

Brown also highlighted the expansion of his summer youth employment initiative. The program placed 2,535 young people between ages 14 and 24 in jobs at local businesses, community agencies and in city facilities.

That was almost double the number of people placed in jobs two years earlier. Participants in this summer's program also attended workshops dealing with job readiness, handling finances and other life skills.

Experts have long noted that education is a potent weapon for combating poverty. Buffalo's school district receives 81 percent of its operating budget from the state; about 10 percent of the school district's general budget comes from the city.

Half of tax dollars to schools

Brown said the \$70.3 million the city provides to its school district represents almost half of every dollar Buffalo raises through property taxes. He added that the city is fairly close to its constitutional tax ceiling, limiting its ability to increase property taxes.

Still, Brown thinks there are ways the Board of Education and the city could work more closely to make more efficient use of existing funds. He's convinced the two entities could achieve joint savings by combining certain City Hall functions, then use the money for programs that would help boost student achievement and keep young people in school.

State Sen. Antoine M. Thompson, a former Common Council member who was chairman of the Council's Education Committee, said he's convinced school dropout rates are a major cause of poverty in the city.

"We have to find ways to reduce dropout rates," said Thompson. "Part of it involves finding ways to make better use of existing money," Thompson said.

On another front, Brown believes Buffalo is doing a better job spending federal block grants targeted to ease poverty and blight. Unlike past eras, the mayor said, city officials are making sure programs can demonstrate measurable results.

"In the old days, it was a matter of getting in line [for block grants], putting your hand out and getting money without having to show anything for it," Brown said.

Brown underscored the need to forge partnerships with the state and federal governments to fight poverty — alliances that would bring new

resources to the challenge.

“No one can believe that the city can do this all by itself,” he said.

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