

Business First of Buffalo - December 17, 2007

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Panel hammers leaders for failing to take action

Business First of Buffalo - by [David Bertola](#) Business First

Decision paralysis.

It has put a stranglehold on projects ranging from a companion to the Peace Bridge to the downtown waterfront.

So says Carl Paladino, one of four economic-development insiders to speak at Business First's inaugural Power Breakfast.

"It indicates we have weak leaders who are unable to make decisions," Paladino said. "We have historically elected and keep putting the same people in office. We don't seem to learn the vote means something."

Then he directed some criticism at his fellow businesspeople.

"We have a terrible situation with private-sector leadership," he said. "We have none. ... What's lacking is a common sense of vision and direction."

Paladino, an attorney and the CEO of **Ellicott Development Co.**, was joined by **Buffalo Niagara Enterprise** President and CEO Tom Kucharski; Eric Recoon, vice president of leasing and development for **Benderson Development Co.**; and Henry Louis Taylor Jr., director of the University at Buffalo's Center for Urban Studies.

They all come from decidedly different backgrounds and offered responses that reflected their diversity.

Topics addressed at the breakfast, held Dec. 6 at the Millennium Hotel in Cheektowaga, included how to infuse private-sector leadership into development projects and how to involve minorities in programs that ultimately benefit their neighborhoods.

Economic development was the first topic in a series. Panelists answered questions from Business First, then the audience. More than 200 were in attendance.

"What's lacking is an absence of a common sense of a common region we're trying to build," Taylor said. "Since these don't exist, we've opened up the door for a multitude of opinions of



Jim Courtney

Carl Paladino cites poor leadership and lack of vision for the area's failure to follow through on numerous projects.

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what to do, which leads to indecisiveness."

Kucharski, a Western New York native who worked in Florida and Pennsylvania, said the public sector dominates leadership.

"This has been very eye-opening the last eight years since I came home (to) see how public-sector dominated we are and how we've allowed this to happen," he said. "We're going on a path where we're not going to be able to afford to live here."

When asked about the opportunity to mentor the next generation of leaders, Kucharski said: "They're not here."

He then pointed to an influx of people who have come to the region with new ideas.

"Somehow," he said, "we have to make the connection between them and the elder statesmen. The mantle needs to be passed."

One example of a person who represents new blood and a new vision is British investor Bashar Issa, who has acquired the Statler Towers and has laid out ambitious plans for downtown development. He is investing more than \$100 million of his family's money in renovating the venerable downtown Buffalo landmark, while also considering construction of a 40-story, mixed-use tower one block away on South Elmwood Avenue. Both would be privately funded.

Recoon recalled a recent lunch experience with Issa.

"During the course of the meal, three or four people came over to him to introduce themselves," Recoon said. "The guy's like a rock star."

He said larger development companies in the region that have been investing private funds in this community for decades are not treated with the same reverence as Issa, a newcomer.

"It's disheartening and creates challenges that are artificial," said Recoon, whose employer - Benderson - would be included among the developers to which he referred. "There's an undercurrent of negativity that tends to permeate any desire to move past the pettiness and get things accomplished."

Leadership: 'Weak' and 'can't make decisions'

Paladino said it is incumbent upon voters to hold political figures accountable and make sure they are doing their jobs. Accentuating his point, he recalled that the day after he filed the lawsuit to remove the Thruway tolls, he received a call from an assemblyman whose nose apparently was out of joint.

Paladino was told, in so many words, to back off. The assemblyman called it his issue. After all, it was he, not Paladino, who had been working on the problem for 12 years. Paladino, through a lawsuit he filed in New York State Supreme Court, was able to force the **New York Thruway Authority** to remove two toll barriers along the I-190 in Buffalo within a matter of months. The booths were removed last October.

"Some people elected have hung around long enough because of their ability to hang signs well, and we endow them with the power over our children and our grandchildren," Paladino said. "But some of these people elected would have a tough time getting a job at Benderson's Delta Sonic."

He questioned why more of those in the private sector hadn't backed County Executive-elect Christopher Collins, who Paladino said "has heart and soul, has no political baggage and talks our language." The Buffalo Niagara Partnership declined to endorse either Collins or his opponent, James Keane, marking the first time in its history it did not back a candidate in a major political race.

Paladino is a frequent critic of the Partnership and of its president and CEO, Andrew Rudnick. He said he feels the organization is not a strong advocate for downtown Buffalo issues.

As Paladino talked, he pointed Collins out in the audience.

Other elected officials in attendance were County Clerk Kathy Hochul and Assemblyman Robin Schimminger.

No connection between people, initiatives

Taylor cited the life sciences cluster in the city's Fruit Belt as an example where a gap exists between the initiative and those who live near the site.

"There's no connection between the two," he said. "How can we create occupational pathways between both?"

Taylor maintained that resources would be necessary to build workforces and develop entrepreneurs to create such linkages.

Bass Pro would be a great downtown catalyst

Regarding the Bass Pro project, Recoon said public-sector money is necessary to prime the pump to get an infusion of private-sector money.

Paladino chimed in, wrapping up the discussion with the same topic that launched it: decision paralysis.

"In 1991, I sat on the Horizons board and introduced a way to finance the harbor project, and in 1996 we began talking about the Peace Bridge," he said.

"This reflects what happens when there's no vision," said Taylor.

To follow up on Recoon's thoughts, Paladino said it should be a no-brainer to ask the state for \$35 million to get things started with private money.

"How stupid is it to say we shouldn't ask for it?" he said. "In New York City, they ask the state for that amount every day. Bass Pro ... I wish it was here today. It'll be a great catalyst for downtown."

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