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Section: Local

Conservancy chief defends plans to restore MLK Park wading pool

Brian Meyer - NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Restoration of the massive wading pool at Martin Luther King Park will have a lasting impact on the surrounding neighborhood, the head of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy says.

Thomas Herrera-Mishler, the conservancy's chief executive and president, is going to bat for a key project in Mayor Byron W. Brown's proposed capital budget. The city already has spent \$2 million to convert part of the park's wading pool into a splash pad. The mayor's new plan follows a recommendation made by the conservancy and a citizens advisory panel to allot \$1.8 million to complete the project.

The finished product, Herrera-Mishler said, would be the largest water feature of its kind in the nation and would be a year-round asset. Bathers would gather at the Masten District attraction in the summer, while ice skaters would use the facility in the winter. During the spring and autumn months, Herrera-Mishler said, the splash pad will be turned into an attractive reflecting pool.

"It will have a game-changing impact on that neighborhood, and certainly that park," he told lawmakers during a capital budget work session in City Hall.

Some Council members recently criticized Brown's budget plan for allocating more money to projects in the Masten District, his home turf, than he earmarked for other sections of the city. But the mayor countered that the vast majority of his \$22.7 million plan would allocate money to projects that benefit neighborhoods citywide. For example, \$4.8 million would be used to repair streets, sidewalks and curbs in districts throughout Buffalo.

Council President David A. Franczyk, one of the critics of the mayor's budget, said he has always supported improvements at Martin Luther King Park and will continue to do so.

"But we have to find more money for projects in other districts," Franczyk said after the work session.

Meanwhile, some planning experts have defended Brown's plan to earmark money for big-ticket projects in the Masten District. Henry Louis Taylor Jr., of the University at Buffalo's urban and regional planning department, said the capital improvements are part of a comprehensive blueprint for the "holistic transformation of a community." Taylor said he hopes the coordinated approach will create a model for neighborhood redevelopment.

"If we succeed, we will be able to take that model and the experiences gained, and transform every distressed neighborhood in the city," Taylor told a reporter.

The mayor's plan would also spend \$561,750 on lead abatement at a vacant city-owned building at 725 Humboldt Parkway. Masten Council Member Demone A. Smith said the facility would become a focal point for various community services, including a likely Head Start program.

The Council has until Dec. 15 to make any changes to the capital budget. In addition to the \$22.7 million that would be allocated to city projects, the plan would earmark \$4.9 million for improvements in a dozen public schools.

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