

Mayor unveils new development agency
Brown's plan would create 'one-stop shop' to allow more comprehensive planning

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Brian Meyer - NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Some business leaders and neighborhood activists are praising a plan unveiled Friday by Mayor Byron W. Brown to abolish a widely criticized city development agency and set up a "one-stop shop" for businesses and homeowners in an another agency.

Eliminating the Buffalo Economic Renaissance Corp. and shifting all functions to the Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency was one initiative Brown announced in his fourth State of the City address.

The expanded agency will be more visible, have stronger oversight and will engage in more comprehensive planning, the mayor said.

"BURA's new mission will be to support neighborhood economic development that builds around our commercial cores, with a concentrated effort of housing revitalization, demolitions, infrastructure improvements and providing loans and grants to businesses to create strong neighborhoods," Brown said.

BERC's problems have been numerous. Its role in financing and helping to operate the ill-fated One Sunset restaurant has triggered a federal probe. Other problems have included lax oversight and accountability. A recent city audit also cited the need to revamp lending practices. Brown told reporters after his speech that many reforms have already been implemented.

Folding BERC into the Urban Renewal Agency is a key step forward, said community activist Henry Louis Taylor Jr. of the University at Buffalo's urban and regional planning department.

"We definitely need to integrate neighborhood development with economic development and housing," said Taylor.

But he agreed with others who noted that the consolidation must be implemented properly.

"The truck is moving in the right direction. We just need to be able to drive it," Taylor said.

"The devil is always in the details," added Laura Smith, vice president of business development at the Buffalo Niagara Partnership.

The Partnership worked with an advisory group created by Brown to study ways to revamp Buffalo's economic development model. Dennis Penman, a local developer who is BERC's interim president, said the mayor's plan is consistent with the study team's goals.

"We need to take a more holistic approach to economic development," he said.

The mayor's address attracted 1,100 guests, along with several hundred picketing firefighters and police officers who staged a protest outside the Buffalo Niagara Convention Center.

Other highlights of the speech included:

A plan to help lower residential property tax rates by using some of Buffalo's surplus. Brown wants to establish a \$15 million fund to finance economic development and quality-of-life initiatives and help lower property taxes. He said it's too soon to say how much of a tax cut he will propose in a budget that must be released by May 1.

An announcement that federal housing officials have "cleared" the 19 areas of concern they had previously red-flagged in Buffalo's problem-plagued block grant program. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development had been sharply critical of the way the city spent anti-poverty funds, concerns that had spanned three mayoral administrations.

Plans to move forward with long-discussed efforts to revamp Buffalo's outdated zoning code.

"Buffalo's zoning reflects the city as it existed in the 1950s and must be modernized," the mayor said. "Attempts have been made over the past 60 years to address issues with the zoning code, but these efforts have led to a patchwork system filled with internal conflict."

Brown will seek Common Council approval to hire a consultant to "bring Buffalo's zoning code into the 21st century." He described the Chicago-based Camiros company as a "nationally recognized" planning consultant.

As guests arrived at the convention center, they were greeted by several hundred picketing firefighters and police officers. Protesters cited a variety of disputes involving the mayor and unions, including some pending lawsuits over wages and benefits.

"You do realize you're crossing a picket line, don't you?" one firefighter asked guests.

Another used a bullhorn to announce that certain people and representatives of various companies were crossing the picket line.

Many firefighters carried signs that read "We Want a Contract That Is Fair." They said they've been working eight years under an expired contract. Brown later noted that his administration proposed two contract settlements that were rejected by firefighters in 2007 and 2008.
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