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Brown touts signs of renewal for city

Despite problems of poverty, mayors point to \$4.3 billion in development projects

By Brian Meyer

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Buffalo's poverty problem was a half-century in the making, Mayor Byron W. Brown said Tuesday, and he believes easing the crisis will take years of concerted efforts by many entities.

But Brown insisted there are signs that the city is moving down the right path, despite Census Bureau figures that brand Buffalo the second-poorest big city in the nation.

The mayor pointed to \$4.3 billion in development projects that are either under construction, in the pipeline or recently completed.

His message on the heels of a series in The Buffalo News that examined the city's poverty scourge: There's a brighter future ahead.

"As mayor, I've tried to foster a can-do attitude — someone who helps to create an atmosphere of hope and opportunity," Brown said.

But is it a beacon of false hope that Buffalo's optimistic mayor is shining toward the city's future? Brown insisted not, pointing to what he described as clear signs that bolster his often-recited mantra that the city is turning the corner.

He cited development projects large and small that are planned or have been completed downtown, along the waterfront, in the Buffalo Niagara Medical Corridor and in some neighborhoods. What's more, Brown said his administration is focused on finding ways to make sure such projects create jobs for city residents and low-income individuals.

Brown cited other initiatives that he believes will help reduce poverty, including:



- An expansion of the city's summer jobs program for youth, including a heavier emphasis on providing training and job readiness skills. The program placed more than 2,500 people between the ages of 14 and 24 in summer jobs this year, a 58 percent increase over the previous year.
- A heightened emphasis on literacy programs by the city, recognition of the fact that unless learning deficits are addressed, the cycle of poverty will continue.
- An acceleration of Buffalo's ongoing demolition blitz. Brown has set a goal of tearing down 5,000 blighted properties within five years. But the \$100 million price tag will require significant help from the state and federal levels. Brown has also reached out to foundations, businesses and even private citizens to encourage them to donate money to the effort.
- The city's role in helping to win passage of a state program called RESTORE New York. Grants are provided to municipalities aimed at revitalizing commercial and residential properties. Brown said Buffalo is eligible for up to \$20 million in assistance, and some money has already been earmarked to fund demolitions.
- A \$1 billion program to rebuild and modernize schools throughout the city. Brown said he's convinced the ongoing Joint Schools Construction Board project will produce numerous benefits. Schools will become "safe havens" in communities, he said, helping to improve quality of life.

He also expressed confidence that better educational facilities will help improve academic achievement.

- Anti-crime efforts that focus on drugs, gangs and illegal guns. The mayor added that plans to hire 100 new police officers next year should also help strengthen neighborhoods.

While Brown's tone is unmistakably upbeat when talk turns to Buffalo's future, he willingly acknowledges that Buffalo can't possibly solve all its woes in a vacuum.

"I think [The News] series pointed out quite clearly that no one entity can solve the problem of poverty by itself," the mayor said.

Brown was especially harsh in critiquing the role that the federal government has played in anti-poverty efforts under the Bush administration. Communities like Buffalo have seen federal block grants — money earmarked to combat poverty and blight — shrunk by more than 32 percent in the past six years.

"I don't see a clear urban policy at the federal government level under this administration," Brown said. "There's no question that funding for poor communities and organizations that help poor people has been reduced."

But Brown, who is almost midway through his first four-year term as mayor, said he remains convinced that Buffalo is on the rebound.

"We have to continue to project a sense of hope and opportunity for residents in this community," he said.

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