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Buffalo News file photo

Schroeder labels Silver 'obstructionist' for opposing UB's 2020 plan

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Updated: April 28, 2010, 5:44 pm /

Published: April 28, 2010, 7:21 pm

ALBANY — In a rare move against the Legislature's most powerful Democrat, one of Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver's colleagues is criticizing him for "killing" a plan to help the University at Buffalo and other SUNY colleges expand.

Assemblyman Mark Schroeder labeled Silver, a Manhattan Democrat who has controlled the Assembly since 1994, an "obstructionist" for "standing in the way" of UB's 2020 program that university officials and others say will transform UB into a driving force for new jobs and education programs in Western New York.

"If the Speaker is not being an obstructionist, he should bring the bill to the floor for a full house vote," Schroeder said.

The plan, which would also benefit other SUNY campuses, has been embraced and advanced by Gov. David Paterson and supported by the Democratic-led Senate. It would give UB some relief from state regulations involving contracting and give some autonomy in setting tuition rates.

Critics in the Assembly have raised concerns that low-income students will be hurt if Albany does not keep control over decisions involving matters like tuition and have worried about creating a slippery slope for other colleges in the 64-campus system.

Backers are pushing a "rational" tuition plan, which would see SUNY tuition grow at more predictable, inflation-based levels each year instead of big jumps once every four or five years.

The plan, first proposed by UB several years ago, would give flexibility to other SUNY campuses for such things as land deals and partnerships with the private sector. Locally, it is seen as benefiting the

downtown health corridor. UB has said its plans will create nearly 7,000 jobs.

Schroeder called Silver an "obstructionist" to the bill. Silver told the Western New York delegation last year that if they could get the support of SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher for the effort that the Assembly would pass the bill, the South Buffalo Democrat said.

Zimpher has since signed on.

"He said, get the new chancellor's support and we got a deal, and it never happened," the Schroeder said in an interview this morning.

"The current obstruction in the Assembly majority conference is a misguided power play," Schroeder said in a recent letter to Silver.

More than 40 Democrats have pledged to support the Higher Education and Innovation Act, he said, and Republicans have told him they can provide 38 votes — enough to pass the legislation if brought to the floor.

Silver and other Democrats from New York City oppose the measure that will largely help the upstate-based SUNY system, Schroeder said.

If the UB 2020 bill dies in the Assembly this year, Schroeder said, he will not vote for Silver when his colleagues gather to for the next Speaker vote in January.

Silver, whose members rarely ever criticize him in public, was not immediately available for comment this morning.

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