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## UB development threatened by state cuts

Business First of Buffalo - by [Allissa Kline](#)

What could be at the **University at Buffalo** may not be after all.

UB 2020, the institution's sweeping plan to transform itself into a renowned public research university – and in theory spur a massive economic renaissance in Western New York – is at risk, UB officials say. And the risk will linger if the state Legislature continues to cut public higher education funding and fails to enact legislation that would give **State University of New York** campuses more control of their fiscal affairs.

At best, implementation of the plan is being pushed out beyond the year 2020, UB says. At worst, the full vision may never be realized.

"We are doing the things we can do to build this plan," UB President John Simpson said last week during an interview at his North campus office. "We have done or are doing what we can control or change, but we can only do so much within the rules we're given by New York state to operate. I think we're at a crossroads."

UB 2020, arguably the most comprehensive economic development plan for Western New York, has become increasingly tangled in politics since its introduction nearly four years ago. The situation is more complex this year as Albany lawmakers hash out the 2010-11 state budget. At issue are two factors: projected SUNY-wide budget cuts totaling roughly \$109 million, which translates to at least \$16.5 million in state funding reductions for UB and could mean layoffs and program reductions; and the proposed Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act, or PHEEIA, a piece of legislation that calls for giving SUNY campuses certain "tools" to operate independently, such as the abilities to raise tuition without legislative approval and lease land to private developers.

PHEEIA was included in Gov. David Paterson's proposed executive budget. The Senate included parts of it in its budget resolution, while the Assembly left it out completely.

Neither state Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver nor Assemblywoman Deborah Glick, who chairs the Assembly's higher education committee, were available to comment.

UB officials worry that the combination of budget cuts and state regulations are derailing UB 2020, whose profile has risen dramatically this spring during budget negotiations. Television advertisements tout the benefits of the plan, while e-mail blasts sent to "UB Believers" ask the UB community to contact state leaders in support of the plan. Simpson himself has upped the urgency of his message, delivering press conferences and spending most of his time talking about UB 2020's potential impact for the university and community – and what's at risk if it doesn't happen.

He said PHEEIA is "in some jeopardy" and completion of UB 2020 "has been pushed out by years." But the plan is still viable, he said.

"The vision is not what's changed," he said. "What's changed is the time it's going to take us to get there."

UB 2020 was born out of much planning by university leaders, who began conversations about transforming UB into a world-class research university shortly after Simpson arrived as the new president in 2004. By 2006, he unveiled a comprehensive plan intended to become Buffalo's means toward the establishment of a knowledge-based economy. The idea quickly gained support from top-level business and community leaders while four themes emerged: growing student, staff and faculty populations by 40 percent; realigning business operations for greater efficiency and delivery; building out the three campuses, including its presence in downtown Buffalo; and achieving academic excellence.

Since then, much of the business realignment has taken place and several construction projects or building renovations are under way. Four hundred eighty-one new faculty members have been hired, and a complete physical master plan some 500 pages long has been prepared. A study last year by the UB Regional Institute projected that UB 2020 would double the amount of university-related dollars coming into the area, from \$1.7 billion now to \$3.6 billion annually.

UB 2020's impact would be an immense boost to the region, said UB alum Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, president and CEO of the **Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo**.

"These are huge numbers," she said, referring to anticipated job creation and dollars pumped into the local economy. "We have got to see our way to this. I just don't think failure is an option here."

But UB 2020 supporters worry that, without passage of PHEEIA, UB 2020 in its entirety won't happen. Some point to contingency plans if PHEEIA falls through, whereby pieces of the initial proposed legislation could get passed before the end of the current legislative season.

"If it doesn't get approved as a SUNY-wide bill, maybe it gets approved as some version of it," said Andrew Rudnick, president and CEO of the **Buffalo Niagara Partnership**, a business advocacy group whose annual agenda lists UB 2020 as its top priority. "Instead of all of it, you do 20 percent of it or maybe do it for some schools and not others. There are all kinds of possible variations."

Local state representatives Sen. William Stachowski, D-Lake View, and Assemblywomen Crystal Peoples-Stokes, D-Buffalo, say they support the UB 2020 vision. Both hope the governor and Senate stay committed to PHEEIA as negotiations with the Assembly move forward, though Peoples-Stokes said she would have preferred giving financial independence to UB only as a pilot program rather than rolling it out across the entire SUNY system.

For now, it's a waiting game as the governor, Senate and Assembly continue working on the budget, which is now more than two weeks overdue. Officials are bracing themselves for the outcome.

"If we walk away with these budget cuts and no reform under PHEEIA, the Legislature really has not done the right thing for SUNY and its students," said Michael Trunzo, SUNY's vice chancellor for government relations. "This is all about our students and our local economies and trying to drive local economies by using the state university. It's an economic engine and one that needs to be tapped."

Board of Regents Chancellor Emeritus Robert Bennett, whose board governs the University of the State of New York, an umbrella organization that oversees all education within the state, said the no-cost PHEEIA reforms should be made law as long as accountability and innovation are part of the package. He said UB deserves special consideration when it comes to its fiscal matters because its scope and size are so large.

Simpson, meanwhile, will keep talking. He said he'll stay committed to UB and its long-range plans as long as he feels "effective" as president. He said he isn't sure what UB or SUNY will do if PHEEIA doesn't happen, but stressed that the reforms must happen now to make UB 2020 in its entirety happen.

"The aspirations of the university and the community haven't changed," he said. "But it's sure going to be a hell of a lot harder to get there than I thought it would be."

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