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Expand and revitalize the Fruit Belt

Medical campus, neighborhood could prosper with this plan

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What if someone credible swept into run-down parts of Buffalo with a plan to re-create neighborhoods and connect them with state-of-the-art, modern facilities that would bring both jobs and prosperity? Wouldn't you go along?

The answer seems to be maybe. The scenario isn't make-believe; Buffalo's Fruit Belt could see renewal, under plans by the University at Buffalo for expansion of its medical campus. But the Fruit Belt & Eastside Redevelopment Project has residents of McCarley Gardens apartments concerned, because they would be part of that change if the housing complex is sold to UB. That could trigger a relocation that includes townhouses and infrastructure, could take as long as 10 years and could cost roughly \$110 million. Residents' concern is understandable.

The Rev. Michael Chapman of St. John Baptist Church is sympathetic to those concerns but, quite rightly, sees a broader vision of a more prosperous future for the city and for Fruit Belt residents. He speaks passionately about the place where he grew up, and his voice carries weight — the church owns McCarley Gardens, a complex at Goodell Street and Michigan Avenue that houses about 150 tenants in the subsidized property.

Chapman can see the Fruit Belt of yesterday, where the mood was more one of prosperity and hope, and he can see today. Although the area surrounding the campus is perhaps one of the city's safest neighborhoods, it still is haunted by poverty and unemployment.

Chapman's church has been working for a decade on a plan to reshape the East Side neighborhood. That work continues, with several projects completed. Six months ago, the church finished building 28 townhouses for low-income families, and a \$2.8 million hospice opened on Maple Street a year ago. The Smith Family Life Center on Michigan Avenue was completed in 2001, and the Aloma D. Johnson Fruit Belt Community Center Charter School, located in the Life Center, opened last year.

These projects represent progress initiated by the church, but much more is needed. UB's expansion plan offers a boost.

By expanding the medical campus footprint in tandem with partners such as the Kaleida hospital system, the university will be in a position to create jobs and act as a catalyst for nearby neighborhoods. McCarley Gardens is but one option the university has available for its expansion plans, although acquiring the 15.1-acre tract would

make the project much easier to achieve.

The expanding campus can be a vibrant link between the Fruit Belt and Allentown neighborhoods, and an economic driver for downtown revitalization. The prospect of bringing in an additional 13,000 workers to the area would benefit both commercial and surrounding residential neighborhood redevelopment.

This is a win-win situation for both the university and East Side residents, including those living in the McCarley Gardens apartments. The complex is a subsidized development that, by Housing and Urban Development regulations, would require a one-to-one relocation of displaced residents to equal or greater square footage. Elected officials at every level are supportive of the plan, as is the local HUD office. Any relocation can be traumatic and difficult, but the goal embraced by the planners is to make sure any move is worth the trauma.

The East Side has an opportunity to remake itself in conjunction with the university's expansion plans. That does indeed require change ☐ but change for the greater good.

McCarley Gardens was itself an opportunity for those who got the chance to live there. But simply hanging on to what is there now would miss a superb chance for something better. Ultimately, the McCarley Gardens site seems

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