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## EDUCATION

# University at Buffalo presses ahead with its 2020 plan

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For a few years now, the Buffalo Niagara region has rallied around the idea that a bigger, stronger University at Buffalo may be the best way to revitalize the Western New York economy.

Many believe the UB 2020 plan — growing by more than 10,000 students, adding 1,000 new faculty and building out UB's campuses — is the biggest economic development project the region could offer.

That thinking won't change in 2010.

"The growth and development of UB will have a dramatic impact on our community and represents one of our best opportunities to build our local economy," Erie County Executive Chris Collins said.

But there's still the same problem that there has always been: finding a steady stream of funding so UB's ambitious plan can take off.

Last year came with both ups and downs for UB — the region's second-largest employer — and its long-term strategic plan. But supporters of the plan are optimistic that the year ahead could be the most promising yet for UB's vision to grow into one of the top-tier public research universities in the nation.

Let's recap:

The economy tanked, and with it came budget cuts that took away a large amount of state operating support for higher education, including tens of millions for UB. University President John B. Simpson acknowledged budget cuts have put UB's long-term plans years behind the original 2020 schedule.

UB officials, meanwhile, pieced together a package of regulatory reforms that would give the university more flexibility to grow on its own without the need for additional state money. Key was a proposal to let UB — rather than the state — regulate tuition on campus, which would generate new revenue the university could pump into academics and construction projects.

The entire Western New York state delegation got on board, and took the legislation to Albany, where it got buried. The idea was approved by the Senate, but the bill never reached the floor of the Assembly.

Still, UB pressed on.

"I've always said the long-term vision [for UB] remains intact," Simpson said last year in the midst of

the turmoil. "The road from here to there is what's shifting."

And, surprisingly, UB made a lot of headway last year.

A comprehensive master plan was completed, setting up dramatic changes for the future, including the eventual relocation of the Medical School to UB's fledgling downtown campus in the Buffalo Niagara Medical Corridor.

UB also pushed ahead with \$361 million in construction, using state money accumulated during previous budget cycles to start long-awaited projects, like a new engineering building on the North Campus and the renovation of a dormant building on the South Campus to serve as the new home for the School of Pharmacy.

Most notably, UB broke ground on a research center and bioscience incubator within a 10-story building being constructed with Kaleida Health on the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.

Now, 2010 has started with UB picking up more momentum.

Those reforms that UB officials were pushing last year have caught on and have been proposed for the entire State University of New York system.

Gov. David A. Paterson is now on board with giving SUNY schools more flexibility and freedom from state regulations, so that colleges and universities can become more of a catalyst for economic development in New York.

That would mean giving campuses the ability to raise their own tuition, and use the additional revenue to improve academics and grow their campuses — as UB proposed.

It's a controversial issue, one that's been shot down before, and it's not clear what the eventual outcome will be in Albany.

But in these tough economic times, there's growing interest in seeing what public higher education can do if it's given more freedom to expand and flex its brain power.

A bigger UB isn't a silver bullet for the region.

But, proponents say, it means more students to the region, more faculty, more jobs, more tax dollars and more research dollars, which means cutting-edge research spinning off into start-up companies that drive today's innovation economy.

"Passage of these reforms is very important to the City of Buffalo, because it will enable UB to reach the full potential of 2020," Mayor Byron W. Brown said recently. "This, in turn, will lead to substantial new job and business growth in Buffalo — especially within the city's emerging downtown medical campus."

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