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Brian Higgins champions projects.

Higgins warns against negativity

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Western New Yorkers need to change their mindset about major public works projects like the harbor development and the Peace Bridge to recognize the greater benefit the entire community can realize from their success, Rep.

Brian Higgins told the Buffalo Place board Wednesday.

Higgins said significant progress has already been made in both areas and a lot more will come in the next three years. But he acknowledged the obstacles in overcoming skepticism and even opposition among some people or neighborhoods and warned against allowing the region's tendency toward negativity to dominate.

"This is about the economic viability of Western New York," the Democrat from Buffalo said in a surprise appearance before the agency. "These are transformational projects. . . . The next 36 months will be a period of opportunity for us, but we have to accept these challenges."

He called on the developers and other business leaders who make up the nonprofit board to "do whatever is necessary to assist us," including encouraging people not to be swayed by rhetoric or controversy.

"You've been great, great partners," he said. "Nobody has to beat up on anybody here. Just sit back a little bit and look at what's fact and what's not."

Higgins, who has been widely credited with leading the charge on the federal level for many economic development efforts in Buffalo, came to the board to update it on the status of Buffalo's inner and outer harbors, the Peace Bridge and efforts to bring parts of the University at Buffalo downtown.

"It's all the things we didn't do over 50 years. It's a critical mass of stuff," Higgins said. "It's a whole new ball game. That's the city we once were and that's the city we can become again."

Higgins noted that work and planning are progressing on the outer harbor parkway, to be completed by October, as well as on a bridge to connect the two harbors and downtown, making the outer harbor more accessible and more valuable for development. He said he has spoken to Obama administration officials about a request for money for the projects.

He also cited the revised New York Power Authority settlement agreement, unveiled last month, that calls for accelerating the payment of \$279 million in long-term economic development funds from the authority that were first agreed to in 2005. Under the revision, the money will be allocated to Buffalo over 20 years instead of 50, which means it is worth more now because of inflation.

So while the total money previously had a "net present value" of just \$52 million, the accelerated payment now means it's worth \$105 million, and the Eric Canal Harbor Development Corp. could even "securitize" that expected value to turn it into extra cash now.

That could address a \$55 million shortfall in financing that the Canal Side project was facing, Higgins said.

The revision has already been approved by the Power Authority board and is pending before a separate board now, with approval expected within a month.

"We will finally get the waterfront that people in this community have been demanding for decades," he said.

Meanwhile, on the \$700 million Peace Bridge project, "we are very, very close," with final approval from the Federal Highway Administration expected by mid-June. That project will not only create jobs in construction, but will generate "sustained" benefits in a smoother and more predictable flow of traffic and commerce.

"It's not about trucks. It's about people," Higgins said. "Every aspect of Western New York is affected by people coming across from Canada."

But there is still opposition, especially from preservationists and the neighborhood near the bridge, even though Higgins argues that the project will benefit them, not hurt them. Eighty years ago, a portion of parkland was condemned and converted to create Baird Drive; now, Baird Drive will be turned back into 18 acres of parkland.

And the customs plaza is expected to include buildings with cutting-edge “green” technology to efficiently inspect vehicles.

“You know why kids in the Lower West Side are stuck with asthma? It’s idling diesel engines,” he said. “If trucks flow more smoothly, it’ll mitigate the impact on kids.”

Finally, Higgins praised the UB 2020 plan and UB’s stated goal of moving five medical-related schools to the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus and the Law School to an undetermined location in downtown Buffalo. That would put it closer to the courts and law firms.

He acknowledged talk of UB putting the Law School in the vacant Statler Building but said the school would likely take up only 10 percent of the 750,000- square-foot tower. “UB can’t be expected to just take the Statler and fix it. It’s a lot more than that,” he said. “I’m just asking UB to be more flexible in considering where to put it.”

Developer Paul Ciminelli, a Buffalo Place board member, had another alternative: He said a group of private developers had met last week and agreed that the Statler should be placed in government hands for now as “the best way to redevelop it.”

He said the government could secure the building and then seek proposals from private developers on the best possible use for it. In turn, he said, that would avoid the problems the building is now suffering from.

Higgins called that “a good idea” but wanted clarification. “So, let me get this straight,” he said wryly. “The private sector developers want to turn this over to the government?”

The room broke into laughter.

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