



An ironworker helps with construction on the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus last year. The UB 2020 program would help to expand the campus and bolster the downtown economy.

Bill Wippert/Buffalo News file photo

Keep up the pressure

UB 2020 is out of the budget, but lawmakers can't let up

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UB 2020 is out of the state budget but very much alive, judging by comments from Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and the leaders of the two legislative chambers. It's not what Western New Yorkers were hoping for -- but it's not bad.

In announcing a budget deal on Sunday, Cuomo took pains to say that he would convene a summit of stakeholders to pursue UB 2020, an effort to ignite the University at Buffalo's full economic and educational power. Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos, a Republican, praised Democrat Cuomo's commitment -- the Senate has overwhelmingly approved the bill -- while Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver pledged that the Assembly would embrace a plan to make UB "the center of economic growth for the city of Buffalo and Western New York."

Not bad, but supporters of this effort have not forgotten that Assembly leaders last year killed an effort to approve a system-wide version of UB 2020, and that leading the opposition were Silver and Deborah J. Glick, chairwoman of the Assembly Committee on Higher Education, both of Manhattan. Their fears centered on the impact of proposed tuition policies on lower-income students.

Still, circumstances change and we take Silver at his word that he will work toward an acceptable and powerful plan for UB's future, giving this university the kind of authority already available to universities in Wisconsin, Oregon, Ohio and other places.

He may have a time convincing Glick and other downstate members, but he can count on help from Western New York members, who are committed to the project. Silver and Glick are the keys, though. They need to be willing to compromise, just as supporters need to acknowledge their legitimate concerns. It's fair to say, though, that those concerns should have diminished in the latest version of the bill, sponsored by freshman Sen. Mark Grisanti, R-Buffalo.

Grisanti's bill removes the key opposition argument of affordability in allowing the university to raise its own tuition but with a mechanism to protect low- and moderate-income families.

This legislation is not about denying access but about increasing educational opportunities and turning the university into the economic engine that it should be.

That's why this legislation is important to Western New York. It gives the university autonomy to raise the academic bar with reasonable tuition increases that include caps and provisions for needy students, while expanding UB's footprint in the downtown Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.

In addition, projections for a full build-out of the UB 2020 plan would see thousands of new people on the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus and a nearly \$2 billion increase in the university's economic impact. It would create thousands of construction jobs and provide a vibrant academic health center downtown.

Western New York is speaking with unmistakable clarity about this issue. Silver and Glick, representing constituencies in Manhattan, should be willing to defer to those who best know this region.

But the local delegation has to get in there and fight. No excuses.

Comments

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