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State legislators pledge support for Empire AI

Janet Gramza 4 hrs ago   0

Professor Chase Murray attaches a battery to a drone in the drone testing facility on the University at Buffalo North Campus.
Joshua Bessex, Buffalo News

State Assembly Member Karen McMahon was among the legislators who voiced support for a new Empire AI research consortium with the University at Buffalo as its hub.

With New York State budget negotiations underway, there's no sign that Gov. Kathy Hochul's proposal to create an Empire AI consortium to lead responsible development of artificial intelligence will fail to get the $275 million it needs to become reality this year.

But just in case, its proposed hub, the University at Buffalo, recently invited state officials and members of Western New York's Albany delegation to campus to pledge support for **Empire AI** and UB as its home base.

UB Provost Scott Weber and Vice President for Research and Economic Development Venu Govindaraju welcomed New York Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes and four other state legislators to UB last week for what felt like a pep rally for UB's role in AI research and the future of Empire AI.

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Peoples-Stokes told a crowd of UB faculty, including many already leading AI research, that she sees Hochul's vision as an idea everyone can support.

Officials gathered at the University at Buffalo in support of the university becoming the hub of a new Empire AI consortium to help New York lead in AI research and policy. From left, UB Provost Scott Weber, Amherst Town Supervisor Brian Kulpa, Assembly Member Jon Rivera, Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes, State Sen. Sean Ryan, UB Vice President for Research and Economic Development Venu Govindaraju, Assembly Member Karen McMahon, State Sen. Pat Burke, Marjorie Valezquez of Tech:NYC and Mo Sumbundu, assistant director of Empire State Development.

The State Assembly included $250 million for the consortium in its budget plan, and Hochul has commitments for at least $125 million in private funding from the Simons Foundation, Bloomberg LP co-founder Tom Secunda and other tech investors.

Empire AI founding members would be SUNY, CUNY, Columbia University, Cornell University, New York University, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the Simons Foundation. **UB would house** a new advanced AI supercomputing center where public research institutions can share and collaborate on best practices for safe and responsible AI.

"This consortium would be great not just for UB, but for all of New York State's higher education institutions," Peoples-Stokes said. "And I can't see any way possible that any of our elected representatives, whether it's the Western New York delegation or anyone else in the state, would deny this opportunity for Empire AI to happen right here at UB and benefit all of higher ed."

State Sen. Sean Ryan, who chairs the senate Committee on Commerce, Economic Development and Small Business, said he has been telling his colleagues about UB's history of AI, including Govindaraju's pioneering work on machine learning for handwriting recognition that streamlined the U.S. Postal Service's mail processing in the 1990s.

"When we talk about Empire AI, the first question you hear is, 'Is this money going to Buffalo because the governor is from Buffalo?' " Ryan said. "Well, it probably helps a little bit, but I gotta tell you what else: the University at Buffalo has been doing AI before anyone even called it AI. And Venu here is the OG of AI. That is honestly why they're going to host this institute at the University at Buffalo, for your 20 years of leadership in this field."

Ryan said it's New York's job to explore and invest in industries that are going to grow, including those, like AI, that "you don't necessarily want the private sector to do all on their own."

"We can make this research applicable to grow our economy, but also to make UB a destination for researchers with ambition and good ideas," Ryan added. "Where do I go to apply my brain power in North America? If you're in this field, we want the answer to be clear: You come to UB because that's where it's all getting done."

State Sen. Pat Burke and Assembly Members Karen McMahon and Jon Rivera also promised to promote the project, as did former New York City Council Member Marjorie Velázquez, now vice president of policy for the Tech: NYC network of tech leaders and Mo Sumbundu, assistant director of Empire State Development and Hochul's Upstate New York liaison.