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UB designs a better future

Well-thought-out restructuring plan can strengthen university, community

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Renowned Chicago master planner Daniel Burnham's century-old advice to "make no little plans" apparently has taken root at the University at Buffalo, which recently — and rightly — has unveiled an ambitious campus redesign despite an ever-weakening state budget and a national fiscal crisis. Having already presented a remarkable goal of growing by 10,000 students and 2,500 staff by 2020, UB officials refuse to throw in the towel.

Good for them — and for Western New York. With the university one of this region's best bets for growth in a new economy, its future is deeply linked to regional hope for future prosperity.

UB's plan dramatically redesigns and reconfigures its three campuses by giving each a new identity and purpose. It's a well-thought-out concept that deserves support.

The North Campus in Amherst would become UB's undergraduate center, with a glass and greenery face-lift for undergraduate and some graduate students, becoming the college of arts and sciences with engineering and management. The South Campus on Main Street would house professional and graduate programs, for example the Law School — which, although still separate from the regional courts and legal center downtown, would be linked to downtown by Metro Rail. Programs such as the Medical School would be moved downtown to the Medical Campus.

Clearly the emphasis, both in terms of square footage and programmatic change, is on the capital construction proposed for the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus. The plan, though, also includes demolition of the South Campus "temporary" structures and some of the buildings that have exceeded their useful life. Over time, those structures would come down.

On the North Campus, much of what is being proposed is not necessarily new academic buildings, although there are some, but a kind of quality of campus life and an improvement of the vitality of the intellectual community — how to bring people socially together in a good learning environment.

All three campus efforts work together, putting an emphasis on the transit options being developed with the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority. Conversations have begun with both the NFTA and the Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council regarding the potential transportation system in the region.



The university feels strongly about creating good connections not only among the campus centers, but between the campus centers and their surrounding communities. The redesign blends well with UB 2020, the university's overall expansion and re-envisioning plan.

Both efforts purposely set a high bar, show leadership and involve work that can deliver a significant return to the region in the form of economic redevelopment and innovation.

This is a long-term plan with clear goals and directions and was not made, as UB President John Simpson said, with the idea of anticipating what the road would be like between one point and another. Even though the road is taking an unexpected and nasty turn, the vicissitudes of what happens year to year does not and should not deter such long-range vision.

State universities are in the habit of thinking from budget cycle to budget cycle. Long-term planning allows the kind of forward thinking, exemplified in the 2020 plan, to avoid that short-term trap.

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