



A student walks by Baird Point on UB's North Campus
Sharon Cantillon / Buffalo News file photo

State Senate OKs bill supporting UB 2020

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ALBANY — Legislation giving the University at Buffalo expanded financial autonomy and the ability to raise tuition annually was overwhelmingly approved Wednesday by the State Senate.

The measure, keeping alive the university's extensive UB 2020 expansion plans for downtown Buffalo, faces an uncertain future in the Assembly.

But advocates say key changes have been made in the bill since last year's failed attempt to try to win the support of the reluctant Assembly, including safeguards against tuition hikes for lower-income students.

"With protections for needy students, I'm hoping the Assembly will go for it," said Sen. Mark Grisanti, a Buffalo Republican who, along with other local senators, have staked considerable political capital on UB 2020's passage. The bill, which passed, 55-1, was Grisanti's first as a new senator.

The leader of the Democratic-controlled Assembly said his colleagues still want to ensure the public system remains affordable.

"Obviously, those were the issues that we raised about it [last year]. I haven't seen it. We'll clearly take a look at it," Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver said of the new UB 2020 bill.

The bill permits regular tuition hikes to offer the university a predictable flow of revenue while providing new money for its growth efforts, including the downtown campus expansion.

With UB's blessing, it caps the growth in tuition for undergraduate and graduate-level students at \$375 per semester. A version last year pegged tuition hikes to a national higher education inflation index, which could result in some years of tuition hikes double or more the \$375 level. The plan also returns one of its more controversial elements: permitting UB to set different tuition rates for various degree-granting programs.

UB tuition hikes would need State University of New York board approval; previous plans left that power to the university. The increases, though, could occur without approval by the State Legislature, as now required.

The measure also would set aside 15 to 20 percent of UB's tuition revenues for a scholarship pool to be distributed to low-income students. The bill states that families making under \$60,000 a year would see no increase over 2010 tuition levels. That would affect about one-third of UB's 19,000 undergraduate students.

Last year the measure was part of a larger, SUNY-wide effort; the new legislation would affect only UB.

Grisanti said UB was further along with development proposals than other campuses, and that other colleges could join in the effort down the road.

During the fall campaign Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said he supported the UB 2020 plan, but his budget plan included only two legs of the program: making it easier for UB and all SUNY colleges to enter into joint partnership deals with private companies and simplifying state procurement rules for campuses buying goods and services.

Grisanti said the new bill also requires the UB president to annually review the overall program, including impact on college access to lower-income students, and to report the findings to the governor.

The measure still has its powerful opponents, including public employee unions concerned about protecting members' jobs in any public-private partnerships.

The Civil Service Employees Association, the largest state workers union, said in an opposition memo that it recognizes UB will be "an intricate part" of the economic rehabilitation efforts for Western New York. But it warned it is risky to take away oversight structures now in place to sell land or pay for capital projects.

"SUNY has shown no record of transparency and accountability to merit a change in these laws," CSEA said. It warned deals with private partners also could come "at the expense of public employee jobs."

And some lawmakers have raised concerns about giving too much financial autonomy to UB over such things as capital borrowings and real estate dealings with private developers.

The issue has split some student groups, with some favoring a predictable tuition hike instead of the spikes that occurred over time with tuition sometimes being raised as much as 30 percent in a year. They say they also favor the money staying on the campus for classroom and other programs, instead of going mostly to the state's general fund.

The New York Public Interest Research Group insists the UB plan will hurt low-income students' ability to remain in school or to graduate without going deeper into debt.

They note the state's Tuition Assistance Program's \$5,000 cap is only just above UB's \$4,970 tuition level for undergraduate students.

The tuition hike plan is vital, UB officials have said, if the campus is to be able to fund the loss of state aid payments over the past three years and to expand with a sizable downtown development plan expected to generate thousands of jobs.

Officials note the state, with Cuomo's planned cuts, will have reduced funding to UB by \$80 million over the last three years — taking the state's share of the UB revenues from 33 percent to 25 percent.

Politically, much has changed from last year when Sen. William Stachowski, a Lake View Democrat, temporarily held up passage of the final components of the state budget in order to get the SUNY bill through the Senate. His eventual retreat on the matter helped seal his defeat in the Democratic primary to Sen. Tim Kennedy, who pushed a number of his new colleagues to back the bill Wednesday.

"Let's vote for Buffalo. Amen," said Sen. Ruben Diaz, a Bronx Democrat.

"Buffalo needs help — I think UB 2020 is going to start the development in the upstate region," added Sen. Eric Adams, a Brooklyn Democrat.

Republicans, who last year helped stop the broader SUNY plan, were on board, though several said they hope SUNY colleges in their regions will get the same

power as UB in the new bill. "Today, I want to help Buffalo," said Sen. Thomas Libous, a Binghamton Republican.

But Sen. William Perkins, a Manhattan Democrat and the lone no vote, expressed the kinds of concerns many Assembly Democrats have about the bill. "I'm very concerned about the privatization of the public university system," he told his colleagues, warning that the Legislature should not give up its role in approving SUNY tuition hikes.

For Grisanti, the UB bill represents a major political goal, especially if he is to run again in a district that is dominated by Democratic voters. For Republicans in the Senate, Grisanti also is a key to the party being able to retain its slim majority in the 62-member house.

A new session with the GOP now in control of the Senate has Grisanti pushing the UB bill with Republicans, including veteran Sen. George Maziarz, freshman Sen. Patrick Gallivan and Sen. Michael Ranzenhofer. Kennedy, a Democrat, is joining the Republicans in the effort.

Some have threatened not to back a state budget deal unless the UB 2020 issue is resolved.

The Grisanti bill was introduced Tuesday by Assemblyman Robin Schimminger, a Kenmore Democrat and the longest serving member of the Western New York delegation.

Backers say the changes to the bill will help with some of the past concerns in the Assembly. They add there are also trade possibilities — such as a rent control issue sought by New York City Assembly Democrats — that could get tossed into the mix as a way to give leverage to the UB effort this year.

"This is the first year since we've been backing it that the Senate has had a Republican majority. That's going to help out tremendously because the Republicans in the Senate are more beholden to Western New York than the Senate Democrats are," said Paul Brown, president of the Buffalo Building Trades Council, which backs the UB 2020 plan and the projected thousands of construction jobs it would create.

"This time, the Republicans can hold the Assembly's feet to the fire by doing things like holding back Assembly bills," Brown said.

The union leader said he is confident the Assembly's Western New York delegation can get the UB-only bill approved this year.

"Let's just hope they get it passed. It would be in the best interests of everybody," Brown said.

SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher said the UB 2020 bill will help Buffalo and the region. But she said she has "an obligation to advocate for the entire system" and hopes for a tuition and public/private partnership plan for all 64 campuses.

The bill's advocates say its first passage in the Senate relatively early in the legislative session gives time for negotiations with the Assembly.

UB President John Simpson said the bill's provisions "are absolutely necessary as a way to provide the state's students with access to world-class public higher education and give UB the opportunity to help revitalize the Western New York economy through academic and research excellence."

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Comments

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I hope some of this money is spent for full time professors. I hope UB is not one of those institutions that does research, but doesn't teach its students on how to do research or participate in it. Lets watch the money and make sure the funds are distributed fairly for attracting students and providing jobs in the WNY area and not just an exit education system where our taxpayer dollars supply jobs to other well managed states.

PHILIP JAMES JAROSZ, BUFFALO, NY on Sun Mar 6, 2011 at 03:03 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

I'm so glad that I can count on my sons tuition going up every semester just so it will help out the families that won't be paying anything. When are these colleges going to be held accountable for putting middle class families in financial peril?

TOM BEYER, ORCHARD PARK, NY on Thu Mar 3, 2011 at 06:59 AM

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This action is the key to the future of our Community. "University" is our main industry and the sooner we ALL embrace it, the better chance we have of our Children raising their Families here in Western NY.

MICHAEL MACALUSO, AMHERST, NY on Wed Mar 2, 2011 at 01:32 PM

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