

CITY  OF
BUFFALO

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MAYOR BYRON W. BROWN

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CITY OF BUFFALO, NEW YORK

TESTIMONY BEFORE
NEW YORK STATE JOINT
LEGISLATIVE FISCAL COMMITTEES
REGARDING
GOVERNOR'S 2021 RECOMMENDED STATE BUDGET

SUBMITTED
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ALBANY, NEW YORK

STATE BUDGET TESTIMONY

I would like to thank the New York State Legislature for this opportunity to testify before the Joint Legislative Budget Committee on the impact of the proposed 2022 - 2023 Executive Budget on the City of Buffalo. As always, Senate Finance Committee Chair Liz Krueger, Assembly Ways and Means Chair Helene Weinstein, Senate Local Government Committee Chair James Gaughran, and Assembly Local Governments Committee Chair Fred Thiele, I am pleased to come before you today as the Mayor of the City of Buffalo on behalf of our more than 278,000 residents. I would also like to express my gratitude to our Delegation Leaders, Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes and Senator Tim Kennedy, and the other members of the Western New York Delegation who continue to effectively advocate on behalf of the City of Buffalo's residents.

Governor Hochul's Executive Budget proposal represents a once in a generation opportunity to restore the integrity of neighborhoods through strategic investments in commercial corridors, cultural anchors, and affordable housing. By investing in the physical and social infrastructure, the Governor's budget is providing Buffalo, and other upstate cities, a foundation for a sustainable, equitable, and rapid recovery while we emerge from the worst impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last year, I spoke before this committee on how Buffalo would respond to the social, racial, and economic crisis the COVID-19 public health emergency posed. Because of the American Rescue Plan Act, Buffalo and New York State have resources to address both the immediate and long-

term social determinants of health which caused disparate health and economic outcomes which resulted from—and were also highlighted by—the pandemic.

With the passage and adoption of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Buffalo and New York State will be able to finally address many of the transportation infrastructure needs which have limited our growth and strengthen neighborhoods whose residents have been denied access to the mobility options that will enhance their economic outlook, connect to each other, their school, or their workplace through affordable broadband internet, and foster a cleaner and greener transportation landscape for the future. The Governor's budget highlights how these funds will be used to support initiatives that Buffalo's residents will directly benefit from, and I urge you to support the proposed allocation of those resources during the upcoming negotiations.

From these new state budget funds, I would also ask you to consider specific support for Buffalo's Cars Sharing Main Street project, my Administration's People's Infrastructure agenda, the further development of historic corridors necessary to expand our growing cultural tourism industry, and critical investments in our public health sector, like the proposed Rashaun Nicole King Community Health and Education Center which will serve as a conduit for public health outreach and education in the Buffalo area.

Buffalo is a city of neighborhoods and the continued redevelopment of our downtown must coincide with a place-based development strategy that invests in our neighborhoods. That is why the Cars Sharing Main Street remains a priority. Automobile traffic was removed from Main Street over thirty years ago to allow for the construction and operation of a light rail system. And while the Metro Rail has been a benefit to Buffalo, prohibiting vehicular traffic essentially killed retail in Downtown Buffalo, resulting in vacancies, blight, loss in property values, and an impediment to growth in one of our premier retail and entertainment corridors. My Administration has focused on re-aligning the Metro Rail infrastructure so that it truly benefits the entire community by fostering an approach which encourages housing development and multi-modal traffic along Main Street. As a result, we have worked to reopen several blocks to vehicular traffic, which has had the effect of stimulating retail, housing, and various mixed-use development, while also providing millions of dollars in economic activity and job growth. We are requesting State assistance to continue this project, at a cost of \$100 million dollars.

The success of this project is critical to continuing the redevelopment of downtown Buffalo and creating a thriving, vibrant environment to live, work, play and visit.

The investments in Main Street must be matched by a cohesive set of investments across our neighborhoods but especially in those neighborhoods which have been subjected to historic disinvestment, like Buffalo's East Side. My Administration's People's Infrastructure Agenda will enhance mobility and create more transportation options for Buffalo residents while also creating jobs that will be key components of speeding our economic recovery and promoting greater racial equity. The City of Buffalo has identified approximately one-hundred million dollars in shovel-ready projects in every neighborhood that will help transform the lives of low-

income residents. These projects are critical to improving the mobility of residents, developing place-based economic development strategies that will strengthen commercial corridors in minority communities, and bolster a green transportation revolution that is critical to reducing Buffalo's carbon footprint. The level of CHIPS funding in this year's budget is very helpful, but additional infrastructure investment will be needed for Buffalo to remain economically competitive in the future.

Another component to stable and healthy neighborhoods is affordable housing. Specifically, public housing is essential for families, seniors, and disabled people on fixed incomes to avoid homelessness or housing instability.

Buffalo's public housing stock is among the oldest in NYS, and much of it is obsolete and in need of repair, maintenance, or demolition. A physical needs assessment conducted by an outside contractor during 2020 concluded that more than \$300 million would be needed just to repair and bring up to current standards our existing public housing stock. We would request \$350 million to do additional work to address the needs of Buffalo's aging public housing. This funding would enable us to embark on a multi-year plan to modernize our public housing, replacing developments with more modern and energy-efficient units, as well as providing safer, cleaner developments which more appropriately fit into the larger community and position people to be lifted out of poverty. I request New York State allocate funding to protect this vital source of reliable and affordable housing.

While the streets, roads, bridges, sidewalks, and utilities identified above are the connective tissue of my city, the cultural institutions Buffalo is home to is its beating heart. Buffalo's rich cultural history, architecture, musical venues, and public green spaces dates back to over a century and a half and preserving them is critical to ensuring our vibrant future. However, it is time to finally recognize that our cultural offerings leave out important figures in our history, individuals who were almost forgotten because of the color of their skin, their gender, or the place they originally came from. Buffalo's cultural institutions must represent the diversity of our residents and the heritage all of our communities have offered. It is through an inclusive approach to the arts that we can connect with each other and celebrate a shared vision for Buffalo's brighter future. I urge the legislature to ensure that the investments in Buffalo's cultural institutions reflect our Black and Hispanic, as well as our New American communities, while also supporting the institutions that have helped make Buffalo a cradle for artistic expression across the nation.

The key to a sustainable revitalization though is a return to predictable and normal budgeting that cities have come to rely on until recently. This is why Aid and Incentives to Municipalities, or AIM, funding is essential to every municipal government's bottom line and any compromises to it will have a profound impact on our residents. In 2010, the AIM program was dramatically reduced by 7.6%, where it has remained flat, with no increase, ever since. Meanwhile, the operating costs to provide essential services has continued to rise, especially over the last year. A restoration of AIM, and a commitment to adequate funding so that it keeps up with inflation, is critical to Buffalo's long-term fiscal stability.

I am requesting an increase in the arterial maintenance reimbursement rate paid by the State. The rising costs related to this work, which include paying our public employees a living wage and the increased costs for equipment and materials, require a similar increase in the State contribution for this critical infrastructure funding.

For Buffalo, normal and predictable budgeting also means a commitment to maintaining the local share of casino revenues in any future compact and an equitable share of additional revenues generated from sports betting. Buffalo, as a host city, incurs costs from the siting of the casino and therefore requires a share of the revenue to offset those costs and maintain a balanced budget. Securing this in a new compact will be vital to Buffalo's fiscal health.

I am aware that even in a budget where there are many available resources, we must also continue to find operational efficiencies that will result in structural savings. My Administration is committed to working towards achieving these operational efficiencies, like the consolidated Public Works Campus, and other projects that will yield a significant return on any investment the State makes.

Again, I would like to thank the Chairs and Members of the Joint Legislative Budget Committee for this opportunity to present my thoughts on the proposed 2022-2023 Executive Budget. I look forward to working with all of you in the future to find collaborative solutions to the challenges we are all facing, and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have for me at this time.