

■ SHAMING THE GOVERNOR

PUSH calls out Pataki's neglect in poorest neighborhoods



In some of Buffalo's East and West Side neighborhoods, children who wake up in the morning eager to get outside and enjoy the summer sun are greeted instead by rat-infested, condemned houses. PUSH Buffalo (People United for Sustainable Housing) estimates that the State of New York is responsible for 1,499 neglected and abandoned properties in the city. On July 12, PUSH opened a new front in their campaign to shame Governor George Pataki into forcing the state agency that owns these derelict properties to take responsibility for them.

The plan is to nail eight-by-five-foot pieces of plywood to the doors of as many condemned buildings as possible. The large pieces of plywood are complete with a stencil drawing of Pataki, a sentence about the problem and a phone number to his office for complaints (518-474-8390). The goal is to keep the neighborhood secure from the threats these buildings pose and draw attention to the fact that MBBA, the agency that holds the mortgages on these properties, has not taken responsibility for the problem. The first piece of plywood was nailed to a condemned house near the corner of Grant and Delevan. Prior to the hammering of the first nails, members of the community were given a chance to speak out to those who have the resources to do something about the problem.

Deloris Howard, a Buffalo resident who lives next door to a condemned house and across the street from two more has recently moved to Buffalo and believes it is a beautiful city that needs to be updated. She spoke out emotionally about the hard work she has done to her own home and the difficulties that the nearby condemned buildings pose to her family.

"I would like to see Mr. Pataki come to this neighborhood for one half hour and see what we are going through and what our children are going through," said Howard. "We are living in fear because of these abandoned buildings. Our children need a safe environment to live in to grow up healthy; they need a place to play. To those that have the privilege to take care of this put your feet in our shoes and try to understand what we are feeling."

In 2003, the City of Buffalo sold tax liens on about 1,500 properties to the Municipal Bond Banking Agency (MBBA). The deal was supposed to lead to a more efficient

PUSH'S Aaron Bartley and Erik Walker nail the first of their Pataki signs over the doorway of a condemned house on the West Side.

rehab, resale or demolition of these properties. Instead, on the East and West Sides of Buffalo, an average of two homes per block are condemned and rotting as a direct result of dealings with MBBA. Thousands of these homes sit vacant and neglected with no plan in sight for restoration or sale to responsible homeowners.

PUSH has been the city's only line of defense against the problem. They've done whatever possible to increase awareness about this topic, even going door-to-door petitioning people to get involved in their cause and appearing in various media outlets throughout the city.

"PUSH represents people who want better for their neighborhood, want something to be done and want someone to take responsibility for what is going on where we live," said PUSH's Eric Walker. "Its high time that people who are responsible and people who have resources like Pataki, MBBA, and the housing financial agency should take responsibility for them. Show the City of Buffalo that there is a viable solution and there is leadership."

There is increased optimism among the members of PUSH and throughout the community that this new campaign will reach Pataki's office. These rundown homes will not be as easy to ignore with a picture of the governor firmly planted on the door. The fact that most Buffalo media outlets were on-hand to witness the nailing of the first piece of plywood shows that PUSH has been successful in getting the attention of Buffalonians. The question that remains is whether their efforts will reach Governor Pataki's office.

"We cannot stand by as children wander through open, vacant, neglected properties," said PUSH's Aaron Bartley. "There are dangers in the form of mold, rats, asbestos and falling debris. Damages caused by the MBBA and Pataki's neglect total well over ten million dollars. To our knowledge Governor Pataki has never been to our neighborhood and we want him to see these homes in person."

—*michael a. colucci*

■ WASTED TIME

Few changes made to county charter despite countless hours of work from Erie County Charter revision commission

In the aftermath of the county budget crisis of 2004, Erie County residents began to search for answers. How could this happen, who screwed up? When anything fails, from a business to a sports team to a government, it is human nature to look for a scapegoat. Joel Giambra became the Scott Norwood of county government, shouldering the blame for a government that fell short in its most important responsibility—the public's money. A review commission was established in April of 2005 to look into ways to change the county charter (county constitution). Over a year later, the changes proposed by this commission all seem to lead back to the same question: Is it the system of government that failed, or have the elected officials functioning within the system failed?

The Charter Revision Commission submitted 44 potential changes to the County Legislature. Of those, 33 were accepted in a July 13 vote. Although it appears that the majority were accepted, almost every proposal that involved a substantial change was flat out rejected. Most of the 33 changes that were accepted were clerical and administrative changes that can be described as nothing more than simple housekeeping. The commission's work represented arguably the first serious effort to change the charter since its inception, as well as the last time it will be reviewed for the next decade.

Since the formation of the commission, there have been four open and advertised public meetings, though attendance was so sparse it was laughable. Some legislators may have felt that the public was not informed on the issues and thus took them out of the public's hands. However, the lack of attendance of said meetings, which took place in June and July, can easily be attributed to the hectic nature of summer schedules and not a lack of interest. Low turnout at public meetings rarely translates to low turnout at the voter booths.

Legislator Kathy Konst, representing District 5, expressed her concern that the public meetings did little to inform those in attendance of the issues. She felt that even the Legislature was at times left uninformed due to the nature of the meetings.

"The public hearings assumed that everyone had already done research," said Konst. "Then they were given a chance to talk about the issues, there was no presentation. What needed to happen was to have presentations, and the fact that the Legislature did not make an effort to get a presentation from the commission is a shame."

The most notable proposal that was rejected was a hybrid system of government. In the hybrid system, a county manager would have been introduced who would handle the day-to-day activities of government. The county executive would have stayed in place as a long-term visionary and key spokesman to the public. The county manager would not be an elected position, but rather would be appointed by a national search committee chosen by the county executive, the chair of the Legislature and the majority and minority leaders. Some lawmakers expressed a desire to have a community member on the committee as well, although it wasn't written into the proposal.

If the hybrid system were passed by a majority vote of the Legislature, it would've then gone to a public vote by the people of Erie County. Any changes being made to the charter that result in a change in powers of elected officials have to go to a citizen vote before they can be passed. When the proposal was shot

down by the Legislature, the vote was taken out of the hands of Erie County citizens.

Legislator Cynthia Locklear, representing District 9, voted in favor of the hybrid system. She feels that Erie County is entitled to a government in which two people can work together, each focusing on his individual skills. According to Locklear, taking the vote out of the hands of the people was a selfish act by the Legislature.

"I knew that the chances of this getting passed were very low," said Locklear. "I didn't think there would be more than six or seven legislative votes in support. The Legislature should not act as a filter to prevent this question from going to the people. It is shameful that legislators think they have superior knowledge over the public. The community needs to know they had a right to vote on this and they should be calling their legislators."

Many lawmakers said they couldn't support the hybrid system, because they felt that it was elected officials who failed, not the system of government they were using. Like most systems of government, the hybrid has been effective in certain parts of the county and has failed in others. Although the hybrid was proposed as a budget-neutral system, there was still concern that in these spare times, the salaries of the county manager and his staff would end up costing more than the current system.

George Arthur, chair of the Charter Revision Commission, was not in favor of the hybrid system. He believes that rather than create a new county manager position the deputy county executive should have expanded duties. He admitted that the Legislature did not take his proposal seriously, and it, too, was voted down last week. According to Arthur, the county manager would have signed a four- or five-year contract, which would not make him accountable to the taxpayers.

"The meltdown that took place in the county was not the charter," said Arthur. "No one can pinpoint where the charter failed. It was caused by bad political decisions. If you have a county executive who has good professional people around him/her, then you don't need a county manager. In any system of government bad decisions are bad decisions. It's not the system of government, it's who is there to make the decisions."

Those supporting the hybrid system argued that if our county government can fail based on the bad decisions of one elected official, that is reason enough for change. In theory, a hybrid system would balance the power between two highly qualified individuals, maximizing the talents of each by allowing him to focus on his areas of skill.

There are many different opinions about the hybrid system, and it remains the focus of much debate. Given its high profile in the media, it is perhaps most surprising that the Legislature defeated the hybrid government proposal. Other notable proposals rejected by the Legislature include:

—The establishment of Blueprint for Change, an attempt to put a friendlier face on the county's health and human services. Individuals in need of service would only have to fill out one form and the system would automatically let them know what services they're qualified for. In the end, it was an attempt at consolidation.

—The establishment of minimum requirements for all department heads, an effort to place better-qualified individuals into office.