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Deepening Democracy in Buffalo by Honoring Prior Commitments (And a Legacy)

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Deepening Democracy in Buffalo by Honoring Prior Commitments (And a Legacy)

Abstract

The waning years of the 2010s and the opening weeks of the 2020s have been rife with headlines, editorials, academic articles, lectures, and book titles lamenting a “crisis of democracy”. Among other things, the concerned authors and observers participating in the discourse cite foreign election interference; the global rise of populist authoritarians; the exorbitant financial costs of electoral politics and the attendant subordination of policy to wealth and corporate interests; increasing social and cultural cleavages and polarization; sharply rising inequality; the ongoing erosion of public trust; and a host of other factors as both causes and consequences of the present weakened state of democracy in and beyond the United States.

Not surprisingly, in light of these trends, strengthening democratic institutions and expanding democratic participation are among the highest priorities included in proposals to combat intersecting social, economic, and ecological problems from local gentrification to global climate change. With that in mind, this policy memo highlights two opportunities for the City of Buffalo, New York to answer these urgent calls to deepen democracy. Both opportunities—promoting worker cooperatives and the use of participatory budgeting—have already been experimented with in Buffalo, and have received meaningful resource commitments from the City in the recent past. Earlier progress on those fronts is part of the legacy of former Delaware District Council Member Michael J. LoCurto, who championed both causes through legislation and advocacy. Honoring that legacy means renewing prior commitments to these causes and ensuring that they become lasting fixtures of local governance.

Keywords

Buffalo, worker cooperatives, participatory budgeting, democracy

Disciplines

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Comments

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Deepening Democracy in Buffalo by Honoring Prior Commitments (And a Legacy)

The waning years of the 2010s and the opening weeks of the 2020s have been rife with headlines,¹ editorials,² academic articles,³ lectures,⁴ and book titles⁵ lamenting a “crisis of democracy”.⁶ Among other things, the concerned authors and observers participating in the discourse cite foreign election interference; the global rise of populist authoritarians; the exorbitant financial costs of electoral politics and the attendant subordination of policy to wealth and corporate interests; increasing social and cultural cleavages and polarization; sharply rising inequality; the ongoing erosion of public trust; and a host of other factors as both causes and consequences of the present weakened state of democracy in and beyond the United States.⁷

Not surprisingly, in light of these trends, strengthening democratic institutions and expanding democratic participation are among the highest priorities included in proposals to combat intersecting social, economic, and ecological problems from local gentrification to global climate change.⁸ With that in mind, this policy memo highlights two opportunities for the City of Buffalo, New York to answer these urgent calls to deepen democracy. Both opportunities—promoting worker cooperatives and the use of participatory budgeting—have already been

experimented with in Buffalo, and have received meaningful resource commitments from the City in the recent past. Earlier progress on those fronts is part of the legacy of former Delaware District Council Member Michael J. LoCurto, who championed both causes through legislation and advocacy. Honoring that legacy means renewing prior commitments to these causes and ensuring that they become lasting fixtures of local governance.

Importantly, both policies highlighted in this memo can be implemented in the City of Buffalo in the here and now, using existing municipal powers (and precedents), without having to appeal to a higher level of government. For that reason, they are near- to medium-term actions that stand to (re)energize residents by increasing their levels of public trust and confidence in government and rallying them around the values of democracy and civic participation. Beyond those virtues, and as suggested below, both programs also have the potential to chip away at persistently high levels of inequality and segregation in the City. As such, they fall within the “High Road” suite of egalitarian policy strategies that jointly advance “shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democracy”.⁹ After briefly introducing each policy

and its key features, the memo concludes with a concrete next step for implementing these High Road opportunities in Buffalo.

Opportunity 1: Create a Citywide Worker Cooperative Fund

A cooperative enterprise (“co-op”) is a business entity that is “owned...by the members who use its services.”¹⁰ Worker cooperatives are a specific type of co-op in which members both own and run their business. More precisely, the two foundational characteristics of worker co-ops are that: “(1) worker-members invest in and together own the business, which distributes surplus to them; and (2) decision-making is democratic, adhering to the general principle of one member-one vote.”¹¹

Research consistently finds that worker co-ops: (1) reduce inequality by shrinking employee pay differentials; (2) expand ownership opportunities to workers—especially low income workers and workers of color—so that they can build personal wealth; (3) are rooted in their communities and contribute to local community wealth; (4) offer employees better working conditions that improve job satisfaction, morale, and productivity; and, among other things, (5) tend to have higher survival rates and be more resilient than conventionally owned businesses, particularly in periods of economic downturn.¹² For all of these reasons and more, there is a rapidly growing international movement to support the creation of new worker co-ops and to encourage existing businesses to make the transition to worker ownership.¹³ The City of Buffalo was part of that movement in the early- to mid-2010s. Now is the time to meaningfully re-engage in it.

Between 2013 and 2014, then-Delaware District Council Member Michael J. LoCurto invited a founder of Buffalo’s BreadHive Worker Cooperative Bakery and the then-Social Enterprise Coordinator at the SUNY Buffalo State Small Business Development Center to a meeting of

the Buffalo Common Council to publicly discuss the benefits of worker co-ops and to recommend a strategy for establishing a cooperative business incubator in Buffalo.¹⁴ Mr. LoCurto also sponsored a resolution in which the Council voted unanimously to recognize “the viable potential [that] worker cooperatives offer the revitalization of our city, our region, and the United States.” The resolution went on to pledge the Council’s “support [for] the development and expansion of worker cooperatives with the resources and relationships at [the Council’s] disposal”.¹⁵

It is unclear to what extent the Council followed-through on that pledge. The year after the resolution passed, Mr. LoCurto was asked to serve as the Deputy Director of the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning, which required him to resign from the local legislature. Since that time, there have been no new mentions of worker co-ops in Council proceedings. What is more, Council Members’ discretionary funds, which are generally used to support local community organizations and Members’ pet policy initiatives, were not well-tracked until withdrawals from them began to appear on the Buffalo Comptroller’s Open Book Buffalo web portal¹⁶ in 2017—and there are no clear links between discretionary spending and cooperative development since that time.¹⁷ Searches for the terms ‘worker cooperative’ and ‘worker co-op’ on the City of Buffalo’s website and in its annual budget books likewise yield no results.¹⁸ In short, there is little recent evidence that the City has leveraged or is leveraging its “resources and relationships” to support the development and expansion of worker co-ops in Buffalo (though, as will be expanded on below, the social sector has stepped-in to begin filling this gap).

Contrast Buffalo’s experience with that of Madison, Wisconsin, a city with roughly the same-sized population as Buffalo and located in a fellow Rust Belt/Great Lakes state. Not long after Buffalo’s worker co-op resolution passed,

the Madison Common Council, between 2015 and 2016, introduced and passed one of its own. The Madison resolution declared that “the City...is committed to supporting projects that economically empower workers and help address community needs”, naming worker cooperatives as a key engine of such empowerment. The resolution went on to approve a “Worker Cooperative Fund” and directed the City to invest \$600,000 per year for five years from Madison’s Capital Budget into that Fund.¹⁹

To administer the Worker Cooperative Fund (WCF), the City of Madison issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) in search of partners. The RFP began by first re-articulating Madison’s position that worker co-ops are mechanisms for empowering workers and fighting inequality. Specifically, it stated that a “renewed urgency to address issues of income and racial inequality” motivated the City to dedicate “resources and staff time to help increase the number of worker owned businesses” in Madison.²⁰ Recognizing the City’s limited internal expertise and capacity, the RFP then solicited “an organization or multiple organizations to coordinate and administer technical assistance and loan funds to help support the creation and growth of worker cooperatives.”²¹

In clarifying the nature of the WCF, the RFP advised that the City’s annual commitment of \$600,000 (each year for five years) was to be divided into two equal pools. One half of the annual sum would (will) be available for technical assistance; and one half would (will) seed and administer a loan fund dedicated to supporting worker co-ops. After a period of receiving and reviewing responses, Madison, in mid-2016, awarded the technical assistance portion of the contract to the Madison-based Cooperative Network and the loan management contract to the City’s nonprofit economic development corporation, the Madison Development Corporation. From there, the City negotiated

contracts with each entity and entered into official agreements. Once the contracts were executed and necessary approvals were received, the initial \$600,000 (“year one funds”) were ultimately released by the City in 2018.

Since the year one funds were disbursed, Madison’s worker co-op program has not only achieved numerous successes; it has also produced valuable lessons for cities that might be considering similar initiatives. With respect to the former, the Madison program has consistently offered monthly “Co-op 101” courses and informational workshops to educate the public on the benefits of worker co-ops and advise interested persons or groups on forming or transitioning to a co-op business.²² Just in the past year, the program incubated four new worker co-ops and facilitated two conversions, and it is currently guiding roughly a dozen groups through the formation process.²³ Among the resources offered by the City-backed program for co-op development are:

- Mini-grants up to \$10,000 for assistance and outreach;
- Education on the worker co-op model;
- Business planning, legal, and other technical assistance;
- Connections to local organizations and labor unions and training opportunities;
- Start-up capital and financing;
- Mini-grants up to \$30,000 for co-op development; and, among others
- Staff training and capacity building.²⁴

One key lesson from the Madison program for other cities is therefore that supporting local co-op development means dedicating meaningful and long-term public funding to not only launching worker cooperatives, but to creating and sustaining an ecosystem of supporting services and institutions (e.g., technical assistance providers, lenders, peer networks, etc.) around

them.²⁵ Toward that end, Madison had at least two noteworthy experiences in building its (still evolving) ecosystem of support that offer lessons for other cities.

First, halfway through the year one funding, the vendor that was selected to administer the technical assistance portion of the program “needed to remove themselves as fiscal agent”.²⁶ As such, the City had to terminate the existing contract, appoint and contract with a new fiscal agent, and transfer the sizeable remaining funds balance (more than \$185,000) to that new agent. The new fiscal agent, the Center for Community Stewardship, Inc., had preexisting relationships with the City and had served in similar capacities—namely, as a fiscal sponsor for start-up projects—for other local community organizations.²⁷ Consequently, both the transfer and subsequent execution and operation of the contract were met with approval.

Second, recall that the City’s nonprofit economic development organization, the Madison Development Corporation (MDC), was selected to administer the other half of the contract—i.e., the worker cooperative loan fund. While MDC fulfilled its charge for the first year of the program, by the start of year two it was clear to the organization and its partners that the City needed a new entity dedicated exclusively to worker co-op development. For that reason, the Council passed a resolution directing the City’s Economic Development Division (EDD) to assist MDC and its partners with forming a new nonprofit organization—the Madison Cooperative Development Coalition (MCDC)—to “focus on administration, oversight, fundraising, grant writing, and scope of work for multiple community organizations around the goals” of worker co-op development.²⁸ Since then, the MCDC has taken over as the City’s lead co-op developer, and its numerous achievements have brought it international recognition as a model for leveraging municipal resources to seed and grow worker cooperatives in a local economy.²⁹

That being said, is it possible to have an MCDC in Buffalo? The short answer is that Buffalo already has a worker co-op incubator, though it operates without the \$600,000 per year in public support from the City. More precisely, the two local experts who testified before the Buffalo Common Council in 2014—at Mr. LoCurto’s invitation—on the benefits of worker co-ops and the need for a co-op incubator in Buffalo now occupy the roles of Board President and Executive Director, respectively, at Cooperation Buffalo (CB). CB is a “community-led resource center, a team of cooperative business developers and educators, and a community-controlled non-extractive loan fund [that] mobilize[s] workers to achieve economic security through cooperative business ownership, generating wealth and power in communities most affected by inequality.”³⁰ Among the activities currently performed by CB are:

- Training and education in cooperative economics;
- Linking cooperatively owned enterprises together to form a larger ecosystem of economic democracy;
- Offering technical assistance to cooperatives and prospective cooperative members, including formal training via a twelve-week curriculum;
- Circulating capital to cooperatives according to principles of non-extractive finance; and
- Building a local loan fund.³¹

Learning from Madison, BC’s status as a (1) locally rooted entity with a mission that is (2) focused on growing and supporting worker co-ops in Buffalo, make it particularly well-suited to serve as the City’s lead public-supported agency for co-op development, analogous to the MCDC’s role in Madison. Put another way, should the Buffalo Common Council pass legislation to establish and endow a Worker Cooperative Fund in the spirit of its counterpart in Madison, Buffalo is already home to precisely the type of organization that

Madison discovered—through trial and error—is best equipped to administer that Fund and fulfill its charge.

On that backdrop, while the Council should still issue a competitive RFP to solicit proposals for administering any publicly-financed Worker Cooperative Fund, the evaluation criteria in that RFP must be designed in a way that appreciates the lessons from Madison and conveys preference to locally rooted entities whose missions are tied directly to co-op development. As the only such organization in Buffalo, a thoughtful proposal from BC would plausibly make it the top choice to function as Buffalo's own MCDC.

To fund the operation, note that, following a court ruling at the end of the 2018 fiscal year, Buffalo's Department of Audit and Control stated that it expects to resume receiving more than \$7 million per year from the Seneca Buffalo Creek Casino as part of an existing revenue-sharing agreement.³² As other local stakeholders have already observed, "[t]here are no restrictions on the use of [those funds]"³³, suggesting that portions from this pool of money might be able to be directed toward a cooperative development fund. Drawing again from Madison, whose population when it established its \$600,000/year co-op fund in 2016 was roughly 252,577 persons,³⁴ an investment of around \$2.40 per person seems like a reasonable target at which to lock-in initial City contributions to a prospective publicly-supported worker cooperative program in Buffalo. According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau estimates, Buffalo's population in 2018 was 256,322 persons.³⁵ The commercial data and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software provider Esri estimates that the City's currently population is approximately 260,727 persons.³⁶ Using a round population figure of 260,000 persons that bridges these two estimates, a \$2.40 per person investment into a public worker co-op fund translates to an annual commitment from the City of \$624,000. This sum would amount to less than

nine percent of the City's expected annual stream of Seneca Buffalo Creek Casino revenue—a rather modest commitment for a program that is positioned to “address income inequality and racial disparities by creating living-wage union jobs”³⁷ in a City that is known for its high and persistent levels of racial and ethnic segregation and inequality.³⁸

With all of that being said, Common Council legislation that establishes a worker cooperative fund and calls for at least \$624,000 per year for five years to be invested in that fund, where the fund will be administered by a dedicated local cooperative developer such as Cooperation Buffalo, seems like a reasonable—and feasible—method for promoting High Road, equitable economic development and deepening democracy in Buffalo to kick off the new decade.

Opportunity 2: (Re-)Commit to Participatory Budgeting

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is “a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget.”³⁹ The goals of bringing the public into budgeting include “empowerment, inclusion, and equality...[as well as] government transparency, accountability and responsiveness.”⁴⁰ Moreover, unlike in elections for political office, voting on budgets in a PB process is intentionally as open and inclusive of a place's residents as possible, generally extending participation to “youth under 18 [years old], non-citizen residents, and formerly incarcerated individuals.”⁴¹ Accordingly, the process is purposefully designed to deepen democracy and teach participants, especially underrepresented participants, “new civic skills such as facilitation, budgeting, door knocking and much more.”⁴² To maximize participation in the actual decision-making part of the process, voting occurs over a period of several days or up to two weeks, at various locations within the community and at different times. For all of these reasons and

more, PB has been called the “gateway drug to democracy”.⁴³

Broadly speaking, a PB process proceeds through four iterative stages:

1. “Community members identify spending ideas in meetings and online, then select budget delegates to represent their neighborhoods;
2. With help from experts, the delegates transform the initial ideas into concrete project proposals;
3. Community members vote on which projects to fund; and
4. The city implements the top [vote-getting] projects”.⁴⁴

Once the selected projects are funded, “the planning process starts again, and PB becomes part of the way government works.”⁴⁵

PB got its start in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 1989, where it was introduced as a means for addressing inequality and reducing corruption in public spending. Since that time, “PB has spread to over 3,000 cities around the world”. Use of PB was first documented in the U.S., when, in 2009, Chicago City Alderman Joe Moore committed to allocating his \$1.3 million capital discretionary budget via a democratic PB process.⁴⁶

In Buffalo, former Common Council Member Michael LoCurto (Delaware District) was introduced to PB by members of the Clean Air Coalition of Western New York (CACWNY) in the early 2010s. Shortly thereafter, in October 2012, Mr. LoCurto sponsored a resolution in which the Council committed to learning more about how PB “has been implemented in other cities”.⁴⁷ Following roughly a year of research, video screenings, and meetings with officials from municipalities that use PB (including New York City), Mr. LoCurto sponsored a follow-up resolution in which the Council declared its intent to “explore opportunities to introduce [PB] both through the Council’s discretion and the city’s budgeting process”.⁴⁸ Not long after that, LoCurto sponsored

a third PB resolution wherein the Council called on the City to establish a “Committee for Participatory Budgeting”, to consist of Buffalo residents representing CACWNY and a few dozen other community-based organizations.⁴⁹

The committee established by Mr. LoCurto’s resolution was charged with researching PB and developing a “series of recommendations for the City of Buffalo.”⁵⁰ Approximately six months after the committee was empaneled, it produced and submitted a report to the Council highlighting three potential funding streams to which PB could be applied: (1) the City’s federal Community Development Block Grant (CDGB) funds; (2) its municipal Capital Improvement Budget; and (3) the Seneca Buffalo Creek Casino revenues⁵¹ that were mentioned in the previous section. Both past City actions⁵² and best practices identified by the Participatory Budgeting Project⁵³ suggest that Council Members’ discretionary funds also belong on that list. Because it was not unpacked in the original committee report, it is this latter source on which the remainder of this section will focus. However, readers are strongly encouraged to review the committee’s original report and take stock of its recommendations on the former three streams of funding.⁵⁴ Those recommendations are as valuable today as they were at the time of their writing. For example, after the release of committee’s report in 2015, an official from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Buffalo field office testified before the Council that CDBG funds can indeed be used for PB, and that “HUD is committed... and very open to working with the City of Buffalo [on implementing its] participatory budgeting process.”⁵⁵ Put another way, the committee’s report offers clear and concrete options for Buffalo to begin using PB. To be sure, the energy from the committee and its report ultimately led to a one-time appropriation of \$150,000 from the City’s general fund to run a PB process in the Masten District of Buffalo in 2016. Apart from

that one-off experience, though, the City's budget has not allocated any money to PB—yet residents remain quite enthusiastic about the prospect of expanding PB in Buffalo.⁵⁶

With that context in mind, to supplement the committee's recommendations and highlight an immediate opportunity for the City of Buffalo to meet its residents' demands for PB⁵⁷ and renew its prior commitments thereto, recall that the first use of PB in the United States took place when Chicago Alderman Joe Moore sought to democratize the way in which discretionary capital funds were allocated in his district. Observe further that City of Buffalo Council Members each receive an annual discretionary allotment for "neighborhood initiatives" that ranges from roughly \$115,000 to \$140,000.⁵⁸ At least one Council Member—Niagara District representative David Rivera, a close and frequent ally of the late Mr. LoCurto—has committed discretionary funds to PB as recently as 2017.⁵⁹ Mr. Rivera's office has stated that the Council Member is more than willing to continue this leadership on PB in Buffalo; however, the logistics and costs involved in coordinating and carrying out PB make it almost impossible for any one Council Member (and their small staff) to go it alone.⁶⁰ Rather, an experienced external partner like CACWNY—which led the City's past PB processes—dedicated City personnel, and/or a unanimous coalition of the Council Members would likely be required to push PB forward in a meaningful, sustainable way.

Based on both Mr. Rivera's experience and popular public opinion, then, the nine Council Members have the immediate opportunity to follow Alderman Moore's Chicago bold example and commit, as a body, to filter their discretionary budgets through annual PB processes. A unanimous commitment to PB from the Council would ostensibly open the door for dedicated funding or staff time (e.g., a team composed of Council central staff and District office staff who each devote a certain fraction of their

time to PB) to plan and execute PB events in every Council District in the City. As interest and participation in—as well as excitement for—these District-specific PB processes build, legislators can concurrently design and then take further action that calls on the City to allocate at least some of its CDBG, Capital, and Seneca Buffalo Creek Casino funds via PB processes. Once the mechanics of how and where PB can be applied to those monies are better understood, the existing (functioning) district-level PB processes can expand to include them. That is, after democracy first grows deeper within each councilmanic District, it can then widen its reach across the full terrain of the City and its governance—or, as quoted above, participatory democracy in the form of "PB [can simply become] part of the way government works".⁶¹

Next Step: Bring Back the Common Council Action Plan

Starting in fiscal year (FY) 2004-05 and continuing through FY 2010-11, the nine members of the Buffalo Common Council jointly authored and released an annual legislative action plan that publicly announced the body's collective priorities for the year ahead. The document served as an open notice of precisely what goals the Council hoped to achieve for Buffalo and its residents in a given year.

While an action plan is a non-binding declaration and therefore not enforceable, by articulating their goals and priorities in writing, the document acted as the Council Members' collective set of promises to City residents. It expressed the Members' intentions, and, in doing so, laid bare many of their values. In these respects, the action plan allowed all interested parties to judge the extent to which the Council's values and goals aligned with their personal or organizational values and goals. Further, it served as a tool for monitoring legislative actions to determine whether planned goals were achieved, or at least

whether progress toward those goals was made in a particular year. The action plan was therefore a critical resource for getting to know legislators, holding them accountable, and identifying opportunities to work with them to achieve shared objectives. In other words, the document performed important democratic functions.

In presenting two opportunities for the City of Buffalo to deepen democracy and enhance the public good using its existing powers, this memo sought to identify specific ways that the City's legislators might achieve High Road objectives in the near- to medium-term. That being said, passing legislation and securing budget items both take time and must follow governing procedural rules and calendars. As such, perhaps the single most immediate action the Council can take is to bring back the annual legislative action plan, and to publicly and collectively commit to the two opportunities highlighted above. As a non-binding declaration, a High Road action plan will not by itself usher in a new era of equity and equality in Buffalo; however, as a public articulation of egalitarian goals and values, it can at once outline a path toward shared prosperity for all residents and invite all residents to join with the Council in building and walking that path as partners in governance. Finally, there is perhaps no more fitting way for the Council to honor the legacy and memory of former Member Michael LoCurto—an urban planner by trade who contributed to all but two of the Council's past action plans—than to author a plan that makes strong commitments to the causes that he championed.

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Resources for Further Reading

ON WORKER COOPERATIVES:

Democracy at Work Institute:

<https://institute.coop/what-worker-cooperative>

Community-Wealth.org:

<https://community-wealth.org/content/worker-cooperatives>

Cooperation Buffalo:

<https://www.cooperationbuffalo.org/>

Madison Cooperative Development Coalition:

<http://www.mcdcmadison.org/>

ON PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING:

Participatory Budgeting Project:

<https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>

Participatory Budgeting Buffalo:

<http://www.pbbuffalo.org/>

About High Road Policy

High Road Policy is a quarterly issue memorandum published by the Cornell University School of Industrial Labor Relations (ILR) through its Buffalo Co-Lab. It aims to contribute actionable insights to contemporary policy and political discourses in and beyond the regions and communities of Upstate New York. Content for memoranda comes in part from the Co-Lab's Data for Equitable Economic Development and Sustainability (Good DEEDS) program, which democratizes local and regional data for the purposes of: empowering residents and institutions; informing public policy debates; and providing an empirical basis for ensuring that change and development in Upstate communities follows the High Road to shared prosperity for all residents, from the present to all future generations.

Notes

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