

## City & Region

### Residents deserve seats at the table

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Consider it "Groundhog Day," Buffalo style. While the movie had the same character reliving the same plot line over and over, in Buffalo we have different community leaders who follow the same script over and over when it comes to development. And predictably, they get the same results: controversy and opposition where there needn't be any.

The latest are the leaders behind the proposed sale of McCarley Gardens apartments from an arm of St. John Baptist Church to the University at Buffalo, which will develop the site near the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.

Their refusal to include anyone from the neighborhood on a panel studying the training needed for potential jobs is emblematic of a top-down type of development that I thought had gone out of style with exploding rocks and urban fish ponds.

That's not to minimize what St. John has done in an area where more than 100 of its 3,500 members still live. A decade ago, the Rev. Michael Chapman said, the church undertook a \$54 million development plan after a study pinpointed needs, but no one else had the wherewithal to do it. Today, he points to \$45 million in assets in a 43-block area of the Fruit Belt, including housing, a hospice and a charter school, with more on the way.

But that doesn't obviate the need to reach out to the people who will be most directly affected, even if you think they aren't "experts," which is the rationale for excluding them from the Economic Opportunity Panel at issue.

Expertise is invaluable; the mistake is not recognizing that it comes in different forms.

We have a more genuine Erie Canal Harbor because citizens refused to accept the contention of "experts" that the canal's original stones would explode if unearthed.

We will have a beautiful splash pad/skating rink in Martin Luther King Jr. Park because residents refused to accept "experts'" plans for a fish pond. We have a thriving inner harbor because citizens convinced the "experts" to give up the search for a big-box developer and build on the waterfront's natural assets.

With that recent history, it's hard to fathom how St. John Baptist and UB wouldn't take every conceivable step to get Fruit Belt residents involved at every step, instead of relying solely on experts. That's no knock on the panel, which includes some dedicated professionals.

But just because you have experts doesn't mean neighborhood people don't also have something to add. They know best the obstacles their friends and relatives face and can provide a unique perspective on what's needed. Including them is the difference between doing something for people and doing it with people.

"The community couldn't do this, they don't have the expertise," Chapman still insists, adding that once the panel produces its report, he will contact key elected officials to see how best to release it. He also will make sure the opponents – who've petitioned the Common Council to intervene – get copies.

That's all well and good, but not nearly as good as having them at the table up front.

The reverend says the complainers are just a small group, compared with the myriad entities and individuals supporting his overall efforts.

But as I recall, David was small, too, compared with Goliath.

That doesn't mean he wasn't right.

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