

# City must heed the call to fund arts



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Last year, if you were tuned in at all to the issues that preoccupy Western New Yorkers, you might have noticed that the regional cultural community of Western New York mounted a full-scale offensive against the government of Erie County.

This impressive show of solidarity and activism—at demonstrations, in meetings with the County Legislature and through phone, email and letter-writing campaigns—came in response to the county’s shortsighted attempt to cut funding for most local arts groups.

The stunning coalescence of Erie County’s cultural groups into a unified and powerful voice was one of several factors that led to the ousting of anti-arts County Executive Chris Collins and his replacement with the progressive and arts-friendly Mark Poloncarz.

You'd have to have been asleep to miss it.

Which is to say: You’d have to have been in City Hall.

How else to explain that when Mayor Byron W. Brown’s proposed budget came out last week, it was devoid of sustained funding for the very institutions currently fueling Buffalo’s burgeoning renaissance?

But it was. And so, on Monday, more than a dozen passionate and vocal members of the local cultural community descended on the Buffalo Common Council to make their case for the long-overdue restoration of the cultural funding the city abandoned a decade ago.

It was a full-court press. The community’s arguments, forged in the crucible of last year’s county funding crisis, were more honed and less harried, more eloquent and confident. The fact that

modest public investments in the arts yield high economic and social returns is, at this point, all but incontrovertible. ( “To deny it,” Artvoice publisher Jamie Moses told the Common Council, “would be like denying climate change.”)

They briefly highlighted the clear economic benefits of cultural funding and quickly moved on to broader concerns about the role any great city should play in its own cultural life.

“I think it’s important, psychologically, that the City of Buffalo be at the table funding our cultural organizations, and I mean all of them,” said Mary Roberts, executive director of the Darwin D. Martin House Restoration Corp. “We should be very proud of what we have here in our community, and I think it’s important that the city steps up and becomes part of the process.”

On Friday, the city answered the call of these activists by setting aside \$200,000 for a murkily defined “cultural and anti-violence fund,” an allocation that falls far short of the cultural groups’ modest request but is nonetheless a positive step. It is the first time Buffalo has written culture into its budget in a decade.

Beyond the city’s last-minute allocation, this hectic week at City Hall was significant because it showed that Buffalo’s arts organizations will no longer allow the Brown administration to ignore the cultural life or potential of this place.

The political awakening of Buffalo’s arts advocates isn’t happening in a vacuum. At this moment, progressively minded Buffalonians of all stripes are coming together on many fronts, from preservation and small-scale neighborhood development to education and the environment. Efforts like the Green Code and the game-changing education program known as Say Yes, among many others, have the genuine potential to mold Buffalo into a far healthier and more attractive place.

For much of this reawakening, the Brown administration has remained in a state of half-consciousness. They can either come around now, read the winds of change and take heed, or have a rude awakening at the polls in November. Either way, Buffalo is moving ahead. And City Hall is still playing catch-up.

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