

Community speaks with one voice in explaining priorities to Albany

It's that time of the year when a variety of groups flock to Albany to seek state funding for important projects and programs back home. Rochester is no exception.

For the last four years, we have convened the Rochester Community Coalition, built around the idea of bringing leaders together to develop a list of the region's priorities for state funding. It started as the Rochester Fair Share Coalition, aimed at achieving parity in state funding for the city of Rochester. Since then, it has evolved to produce a larger list of capital and community projects, and we have been quite successful in obtaining full or significant funding.

Our agenda has included major projects that with funding and support will result in economic benefits and jobs for our region. Our mission has been to let our elected officials in Albany know that we are united as a community and willing to work together to secure what is needed for our success.

But this year, given the state's dire fiscal situation, the Rochester Community Coalition took a different tack in developing its 2010 agenda.

Make no mistake: We still think it is imperative that the state invest in upstate economic development. An improved upstate economy will ultimately draw in more business and generate more revenue, which will benefit all of New York. The state's tight finances simply make identifying our region's top priorities for investment even more important.

So for the first time in the coalition's history, not all of the priorities are requests for actual funding. In fact, two of the five involve changes in state policy that the coalition believes are essential to revitalizing



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the Greater Rochester economy.

The three funding priorities include \$5 million over four years to expand the Rochester After-School Initiative, which aims to reduce youth crime and improve graduation rates. This program, developed in collaboration among the city of Rochester, Rochester City School District, United Way of Greater Rochester and Rochester Area Community Foundation, is designed to help young people find safe and constructive ways to spend their time, develop critical social skills, establish mentor relationships with caring adults and gain access to academic enrichment. The investment would develop a long-term implementation strategy and allow the program to serve 625 more youths annually.

Also on the list is \$40 million for the Institute for Sustainability at Rochester Institute of Technology. The state investment is essential to completing a total public-private partnership fundraising goal of \$107 million. In addition to providing up to 6,000 new jobs in the region, 100 professional and technical positions at RIT and 140 construction jobs over two years, the institute will establish the region as a global hub for the emerging green-tech economy.

Rounding out the project requests is \$150 million for an Interstate 390 inter-

change project in Brighton. This would provide a comprehensive overhaul of the I-390 corridor from the Genesee River to the I-590 interchange, adding a Kendrick Road exit and accommodating the increased traffic associated with future growth of the University of Rochester and planned development along Mt. Hope Avenue and East Henrietta Road.

The interchange project would allow our region to fully realize UR's potential for growth, based on a \$500 million strategic plan. This growth is expected to result in an increase of 770 staff members at the UR

The local coalition's 2010 agenda includes three funding requests—the largest being for a project to improve I-390—and two proposals to reform state labor law and economic development programs.

Medical Center, creation of 1,000 permanent jobs in the community and an average 1,400 construction jobs per year for the associated capital projects.

As for the rest of the coalition agenda, we decided to address the need for changes in state policies that affect local governments' and businesses' operations and budgets.

We are seeking mandate relief for local governments, which frequently are required to support state-directed programs and regulations without the necessary funding or decision-making power. These mandates often follow a "one-size-fits-all" approach with little regard for issues

unique to localities, particularly the economy and taxpayer concerns. Albany should refrain from enacting new mandates and revise existing ones that fail to factor in municipalities' ability to pay and restrict local governments' ability to manage.

Among the laws we want to see changed is the Taylor Law, a labor relations statute. We'd like it amended to require that an arbitration panel making an award give substantial weight to "ability to pay" without higher taxes and fees, and we support expanded waiver implementation so that all counties are made aware of existing and newly granted waivers and allowed to opt in.

Also on our list is beneficial reform of the Empire Zone and Industrial Development Agency programs. Several bills are under consideration to reform these programs, which play a crucial role in creating and retaining jobs. The coalition is telling Albany that provisions that increase program transparency and accountability should be supported, while provisions that will increase costs and stifle development, such as prevailing wage requirements and mandating project labor agreements, should be defeated.

The coalition is conveying its agenda to officials in the Legislature and the governor's office. And we plan to make a trip there soon—perhaps more than one—to make our case.

In the coming days, we'll be asking the community for support as well—asking people to send messages of support for the Rochester Community Coalition's agenda to our state leaders. Stay tuned for more on this important campaign.

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