

SUNY plan gets thumbs up from business leaders

by Karla Cruz

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Businesses, local government and community organizations across New York are commending the State University of New York and Chancellor Nancy Zimpher for unveiling a plan they say will revitalize the state's economy.

The groups are urging the Legislature to pass a proposed higher education reform plan to allow SUNY campuses to set their own tuition, lease resources and make purchases without prior authority from the Legislature.

"The Power of SUNY shows great promise for the economic vitality in New York state, but in order to realize its full potential, we need to secure passage of the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act," reads the letter sent to lawmakers April 27.

Mark Egan, president and CEO of Albany-Colonie Regional Chamber of Commerce, said SUNY is a unique system that can be the key for New York to be successful but current laws deny SUNY the autonomy and flexibility it needs to fully "unleash the power of SUNY."

"Nothing is in SUNY's hands," said Eagan. "We support the concepts of the act."

The proposed changes, developed by Gov. David A. Paterson in his Executive Budget and championed by Zimpher in her SUNY strategic plan, would allow SUNY to enter into public-private partnerships and move from a pre-audit system to a post-audit system when making contracts with the private sector.

Those who oppose the legislation, which include some legislators, unions and some students, say taking the government out of SUNY can lead to the privatization of the institution.

The New York State Conference of Mayors and Municipal Officials is in support of the act because, according to Executive Director Peter A. Baynes, the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act would allow SUNY to work with local governments more freely and would allow the institution to enter into public-private partnerships which he says is the key for economic development.

When asked if the Conference of Mayors supported all the act's elements Baynes responded, "There are some aspects that we don't have a position on, but are still supporting the act in its entirety."

Deborah Warner, vice president for public policy at the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce, said there are projects in Syracuse that can move much faster if the

bureaucracy surrounding SUNY were reduced.

Warner cited projects such as the Kennedy Square Project that will redevelop a whole block in downtown Syracuse to create jobs and generate new biotechnology research. The project is a collaboration with the Central Biotechnology Research Center, SUNY Upstate Medical University, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Syracuse VA Medical Center, and 14 private sector firms.

The Business Council of New York State Director of Communications Michael Moran said the changes would make the strategic plan more nimble.

The letter was signed by: Stephen J. Acquario, NYS Association of Counties; Kenneth Adams, The Business Council of NYS, Inc.; Peter A. Baynes, NYS Conference of Mayors and Municipal Officials; Matthew T. Crosson, Long Island Association, Inc.; Mark Eagan, Albany-Colonie Regional Chamber of Commerce; Mike Elmendorf, National Federation of Independent Businesses; Wally Hart, Chamber Alliance of NYS; Darlene Kerr, Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce; Brian T. McMahon, NYS Economic Development Council; **Sandra A. Parker, Rochester Business Alliance**; Andrew J. Rudnick, Buffalo Niagara Partnership; Lou Santoni, Greater Binghamton Chamber of Commerce; Robert M. Simpson, Metropolitan Development Association of Syracuse and Central New York, Inc.; F. Michael Tucker, Center for Economic Growth; and Randy Wolken, Manufacture's Association of Central New York.