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COMMENTARY

Donn Esmonde: On Brown, downsizing and Williams' ego

By Donn Esmonde
News Columnist

I know that as mayor, he is the city's prime representative. But it gets tiresome hearing Byron Brown rhapsodize about things he has precious little to do with.

The mayor reacted to Sunday's three-page New York Times story on Buffalo's iconic buildings and cultural offerings by saying that it enables "more people [to] appreciate Buffalo's unique position in our country's legacy of urban architecture."

I wish the mayor was among those who appreciated it more. For all of Brown's chest-thumping over the city's \$76 million surplus, Buffalo contributes not a penny to the sticks-and-bones cultural tourism marketing budget of the Convention & Visitors Bureau. Beyond that, several significant buildings have gone down during Brown's tenure (although the city at least saved the shell of the buckling 1880s White Bros. Livery building).

While the Times article noted the grass-roots activism behind preservation and neighborhood revival, Brown has been more intent on mass demolition of vacant eyesores than in working with community groups to restore what is salvageable.

Meanwhile, I hear that Chris Collins may be open to bumping up the county-funded CVB's paltry marketing budget next year, now that it has come up with a five-year plan. As an ex-CEO, the county executive should know as well as anyone that you have to advertise your product in order to sell it. That is especially true when the product — from Frank Lloyd Wright's restored Darwin Martin House complex in North Buffalo to historic Erie Canal Harbor — cost more than 100 million taxpayer dollars to bring to market.

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Not since Twister was the party game of choice have we seen the sort of gyrations public officials are going

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through to retain their paychecks, power and patronage — while denying folks the choice of smaller government.

The seven-member Cheektowaga Town Board invited downsizing guru Kevin Gaughan in to advise it on cutting the size of the board by two, then beat him up at a board meeting a few days later — likely at the prompting of town Democratic Party boss Frank Max. Cheektowaga’s backhanding of its citizens comes on the heels of the West Seneca Town Board’s tying itself in knots to prevent its citizens from voting on a board-downsizing measure.

In a perverse irony, West Seneca’s board — led by anti-change champion Vince Graber Jr. — spent thousands of taxpayer dollars on private attorneys for court appeals to prevent taxpayers from having a voice. We ought to change the designation of these people from “public servant” to “self-servant.”

It is no mystery why town and village board members throughout the county are desperate to muzzle their own citizens. When the board-downsizing question made it this month to the ballot in the Village of Lancaster, it passed in a 91 percent landslide. No wonder the politicians don’t want to give people the chance to make a choice.

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The only thing larger than barrel-chested, 6-foot-3 James Williams’ physical stature is his ego. Further evidence of the Buffalo school superintendent’s healthy self-regard is seen in the recent Public School Report, the district-produced newsletter mailed to the families of Buffalo’s 35,000 students. Of the six photos on the front cover, the ubiquitous superintendent is prominent in — you guessed it — all six. Included is a shot of a “surprise visitor” (guess who?) with the lunchroom staff at School 67.

Williams — a bright guy with a commanding presence — has his attributes, but humility is not among them.

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