



# WHO RULES BUFFALO?

A FIELD GUIDE FOR ORGANIZERS



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# WHO WE ARE

**Our City Action Buffalo (OCAB) is a member-led, community-based organization that works to disrupt the political status quo in our city through movement and people-centered politics.**

**We believe in power *with* instead of *for*.**

**We work to change systems and to shape policies that ensure racial, social, and economic justice for all Buffalonians.**

This field guide is adapted from Our City Action Buffalo's 2024 report "Who Rules Buffalo? A Field Guide to the Local Power Structure." Check it out to learn even more about whose interests are ruling Buffalo!

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**Learn more at  
[www.ourcityactionbuffalo.org](http://www.ourcityactionbuffalo.org)  
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All sources and citations for this report can be found at [www.ourcityactionbuffalo.com](http://www.ourcityactionbuffalo.com)

# INTRODUCTION

Why is the City of Buffalo the way that it is? Why have rents skyrocketed? Why have familiar neighborhoods been transformed into something we don't recognize? Why are there SO MANY luxury lofts? And *why* do the needs of the vast majority of its people go chronically unmet?



**In order to answer these questions and more, we must turn our attention to Buffalo's elite - a small number of people who wield way too much power.**

While we like to believe that we the people make the decisions for **our city**, the reality is that the powerful and wealthy few are the main drivers of what happens next in Buffalo. But, who are they? What do they want? How do they do it? And, most importantly, how do we take our city back?

**OCAB's Field Guide for Organizers provides history, context, and an overview of Buffalo's power structure, along with resources to support effective, strategic campaigns to restore power back into the hands of its people.**

# THE BUFFALO ELITE

Over the course of Byron Brown's tenure, we've heard speak of the remarkable progress made in Buffalo. But the reality is much different, with crushing poverty rates, and dual housing and financial crises - just to name a few.

The policies that enabled these crises are obvious: tax breaks for wealthy property owners, intensifying policing, boosting developers, and ignoring the needs of the many. We wanted to know: whose interests does this serve? *Who is really ruling Buffalo?*

So, we set out to map Buffalo's **dominant power structure:**

**...the cohesive network of individuals and organizations, rooted in business and real estate interests and shared motivations, whose interests and influence drive decision-making in Buffalo.**

## HERE'S WHAT WE FOUND:

*a rich and powerful elite  
made up of:*

individuals and their  
roles in government,  
real estate, banks,  
healthcare,  
nonprofits,  
philanthropy, sports  
teams, and others

*organized around social  
clubs and business  
advocacy vehicles like:*

The Buffalo Niagara  
Partnership  
&  
The Buffalo Club

*in order to:*

control key aspects  
of the local economy,  
exert political power,  
further their own  
interests, and wield  
special influence over  
the region

Our research mapped key individuals, their connections to each other, key organizations and institutions, political connections, and everything in between - **revealing a clear and damning picture of what's really going on.**

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# WHY BUFFALO? WHY NOW?

As we start our study of who rules Buffalo, we begin with the question: what's so special about Buffalo? What do these rich and powerful people want from our city so badly that they'd rig the system to get it? How did we get here?

## **A RAPIDLY CHANGING ECONOMY**

Like many US cities, Western New York - and Buffalo especially - shifted from economies based in manufacturing and factory jobs toward services, like healthcare, education and management of business and government over the past 50+ years.

While it's true that not everyone had a job at a local factory, in 1950, 45% of the jobs in Buffalo were in manufacturing. These jobs provided workers a stable income, often with union protections and benefits, that many people could raise a family on.

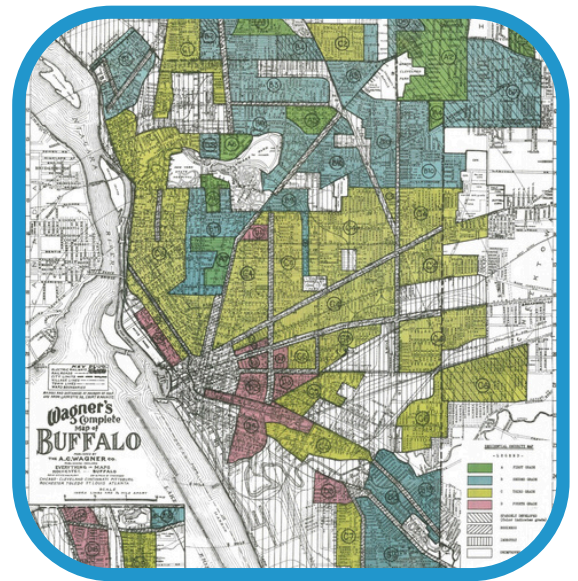
The loss of these jobs has been steep. By 1984, only 22% of the jobs were in manufacturing. Today, it's only 10%.

What does this mean for the people of Buffalo? Lower wages, less workplace protections and benefits from union membership, and less stability in employment. Each of us has a story of the ways that the closing of factories have impacted the lives of our families - *but who we blame for the shutdowns tells us a lot.*

# THE HISTORY OF SUBURBANIZATION AND REDLINING

Suburbanization and white flight were especially dramatic in Buffalo. Racist redlining practices in mortgage lending, highway and car-oriented development, urban renewal, the move of the University at Buffalo to Amherst, and subsidies and other policy support for suburban real estate development all played a role in this process. In the not so distant past, the Buffalo elite really only wanted to come into the City to get to their office, Sheas and the Buffalo Club.

But, in recent years both nationally and here in WNY, suburbanites are increasingly returning to the city. *So what do we see?* Rising real estate and rental costs, fancy bars, restaurants, shops and other businesses, and other red flags of gentrification creeping quickly into working class and historically Black and Brown neighborhoods.



**Because of the legacy of redlining and disinvestment in Black and Brown working class neighborhoods, it's now “super cheap” for developers to buy and build in these communities now that they see dollar signs.**

**How convenient.**

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## **BUFFALO'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE IN A CLIMATE CRISIS**

The City of Buffalo is located along one of the Great Lakes, Lake Erie, the world's largest source of freshwater. As climate change continues to impact our global communities, Buffalo and other Great Lakes cities such as Pittsburg, Cleveland and Detroit are becoming an increasingly popular, and profitable, place for investment.

Due to the City's lack of investment over the past 40 years, the rapid deindustrialization and population shifts, cities like Buffalo are prime targets for redevelopment due to its abundance of land. This includes, but is not limited to, hazardous waste sites (sometimes known as "brownfield" or "superfund" sites) that have high dollar tax incentives for cleanup and redevelopment by NYS and federal agencies.

The City of Buffalo and similar cities throughout the country will be relatively climate-stable as we move into the next century and beyond. While certainly not immune to climate change impacts, the region has been and will be a significant location for climate refugees from the Global South and the 1% from around the world.

**So the question isn't just why Buffalo, but who will Buffalo be for in the next 20 years or more?**

# WHAT DO THEY WANT?

The group of people pushing for a “new” Buffalo are concerned with one thing, and that is increasing their profits and wealth. From real estate developers to bankers, local billionaires to businesspeople, these folks work together to push their agenda forward.

**They get to their bottom lines by caring about:**



## **SUBSIDIES**

Free money to build things!  
Tax-free zones!  
We need more to build and hire!

## **TAXES AND REGULATION**

Less taxes!  
Less regulations! Let us do what we want!

## **LABOR**

We can't afford a higher minimum wage & unions are bleeding us dry!

## **SILVER BULLETS**

Bass Pro will save Buffalo!  
Wait, no Tesla!  
Wait, a new Downtown! A stadium! A...

## **RACISM & SEXISM**

The only color we see is green! Except when it comes to equality & justice...

**We'll be digging into the different strategies and tactics these folks use throughout our guide!**



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**In order to get what they want, big business has played on Buffalo's historical memory of deindustrialization to promote a few convenient, self-serving lies:**



Unions make it too expensive and difficult for businesses to operate, so we have to shut down and move to countries where workers aren't organized.

Taxes are the death of business and corporations should not have to pay them. The government should be doing everything it can to cut my taxes so I can create jobs!



Regulations that protect the environment and laws that protect workers make it impossible for businesses to keep going. If we have to follow all of these rules, we are going to move to places where we don't have to!

**In other words, powerful business owners, developers, and political leaders threaten loss of investment in order to get what they want.**

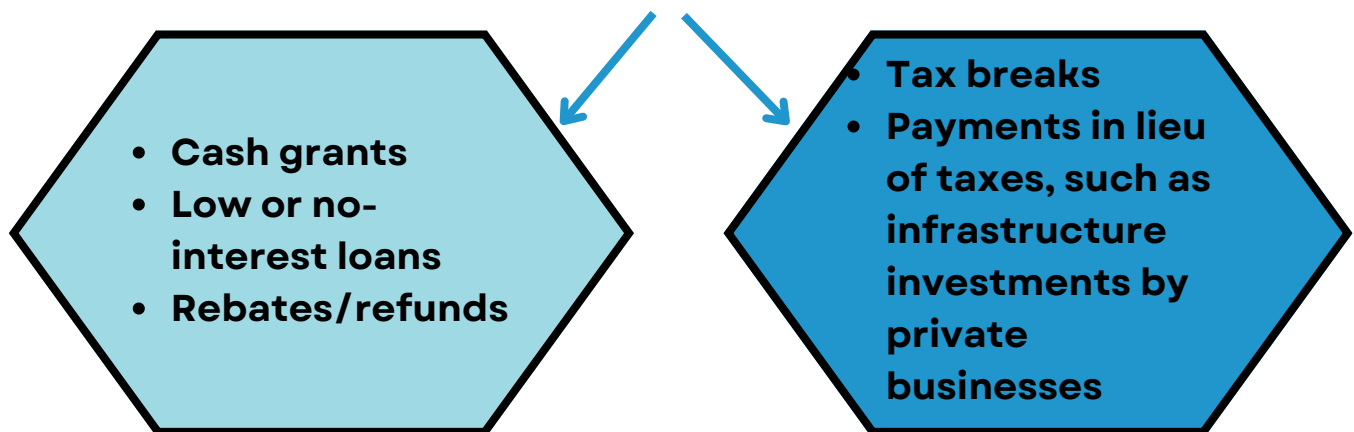
It reinforces a story that only new, big businesses can save us and create jobs. **It tells us that we have to do everything possible to attract and keep big corporations happy or else they'll leave.** How toxic!

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# WHAT IS A SUBSIDY & HOW DO THEY IMPACT US?

A subsidy is an amount of money given to individuals or entities, such as corporations, that are meant to offset an amount of money they pay to the government for taxes, services or products.

**Subsidies can be direct, or indirect:**



Regular people can and do get subsidies. For example, many of us receive a child tax credit when we file our federal income tax each year. This gives us a deduction of \$2,000 (per child) on our overall taxable income.

**But, this is not how the rich and major corporations receive subsidies.**

There are SO many ways that these funds are handed out, to the Buffalo elite, from direct grants of cash and property, tax-free bond financing, tax-free zones, and sales, mortgage, and real property tax exemptions.

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## **The taxes that the Buffalo elite do NOT pay directly impact our City budget.**

In 2023, the City of Buffalo let the elite off the hook for over \$6 million dollars (and this is just 10 developers' commercial property taxes). This means that there could have been \$6,000,000 of income to the city for services that we all depend on. While this is a huge number, the elite still want more...and the City of Buffalo is ready to give it to them.

### **How this impacts the rest of us:**

- No money for generators at community centers
- Closed pools during some of the hottest summers on record
- No funding for municipal sidewalk snow removal projects
- Potholes galore

**In addition, the City of Buffalo is facing a huge budget gap.**

Instead of having the elite pay their fair share, the City is passing the buck onto everyday people through increase property taxes, tickets, as well as fines and fees that could be offset if only the rich were taxed and charged like the rest of us.

**ALL OF THESE SUBSIDIES HAVE US  
ASKING--WHO IS THIS CITY REALLY  
FOR?**

# HOW DO THEY PUSH THEIR AGENDAS?

## POLITICAL SPENDING

It's a tale as old as time. It might not be quid pro quo anymore (though sometimes it is), but not NOT quid pro quo, you know? Don't bite the hand that feeds you!

## JOB RECRUITMENT & ADVISORY ROLES

What if the people who were in charge of finding the right people for a public job were the same ones who profit? What if the people put in charge of making sure rules are followed are the same ones who would make an extra \$ if the rules weren't so rigid?

## GOVERNMENT OFFICES & APPOINTMENTS

Its funny how some of our local elected officials' biggest donors wind up on government boards and committees, isn't it?

## LAWSUITS

When in doubt, sue them! Thats the motto of some of Buffalo's elite when pesky community groups keep kicking up dirt on them.

## PATRONAGE

What's one way to keep your friends close? Well, give them jobs, of course! You get a job, you get a job, you get a job! Funny how many people in South Buffalo happen to work for the City, ain't it?

## LOBBYING FIRMS

When the people who used to be in charge now get paid by the rich and powerful to meet with and grease the wheels of the people who are in charge now, how could anything go wrong?

## CHARITABLE GIVING

How do you make your icky reputation shiny again? Give to the poor! Or a children's museum! Or a college! Surely no one will remember the "bad" you did when theres a library named after you!

## ALLIANCES

Another way to keep your friends close is to be on their boards, their committees, their social clubs, their fundraising committees, their business groups, etc.

A graphic of a spotlight with a yellow beam and a blue shadow on a dark background.

# SPOTLIGHT: **THE 2021 MAYORAL CAMPAIGN**

The example of the mayoral election of 2021 gives us a sense of how much control of city government matters to the power structure, as well as the ways in which it functions to organize itself and exert political influence.

When Brown lost the primary to India Walton, an upstart who posed a threat to the power structure (one that was at times explicit), the local power elite quickly aligned around a plan to ensure Brown remained in office.

Days after Walton’s victory, the Buffalo News wrote that “Business leaders from throughout Western New York are urging Byron W. Brown to run a write-in campaign...” The article cited a number of unnamed sources, and quoted developer Carl Paladino saying that “There is a lot of pressure from the business community for him to say ‘yes.’” One can only imagine the hand-wringing happening amongst Buffalo’s elite during this period of time.

Brown eventually came around – perhaps he saw few future employment prospects from a power structure demanding that he run – and agreed to run a write-in campaign. Contributions rolled in, from 43x79’s PAC, the Buffalo Niagara Partnership’s PAC, and other business magnates, and the Buffalo News ran a number of articles that cast Walton’s character in a negative light. The patronage networks discussed in this report, rooted heavily in South Buffalo, kicked into gear. And the mayor won handily.

When the local power structure is aligned around a common goal, it is difficult to beat.

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# WHO RULES POWER BUFFALO? PLAYERS

So, who exactly *are* these Buffalo elite? To understand the who, we have to understand power and the different indicators of power.

**Power**, in this context, is the ability to act; the ability to shape your reality and the reality of others. We can assess who has power by asking ourselves these four questions:

**Who governs?** Who are the individuals that have governing and decision-making powers within key institutions? This question looks at positions at government institutions but also more broadly at, for instance, the boards of major corporations and nonprofits.

**Who benefits?** Who has disproportionate amounts of income, property, and wealth, relative to the general population? Money should not be confused with power, but it is an indicator of it. And though it is not the only way in which someone can be understood to be drawing disproportionate benefits, it is perhaps one of the easier to assess.

**Who wins?** In cases of conflict, who has the ability to overcome opposition and achieve their goals? This is typically examined with respect to specific examples – a contested election or important issue in the community, for instance.

**Who has a reputation for power?** If someone is considered powerful, this does not necessarily mean that they are, but it can be an important indicator.

# ORGANIZATIONS & AFFILIATIONS

Several notable elite coordinating tables have popped up in Buffalo over the years – strategy tables where top power players get organized and aligned and formulate strategies for pressing their agenda on the region. Throughout the years these relatively hidden and unaccountable groups have used their connections, influence and resources to shape policy and power in Buffalo. But while it’s easy to cast these folks off as a group of all-powerful, evil super villains, the reality is more complicated. Yes, these groups have power and influence, and yet they are still only one tool in the toolbox to advance their agendas.

HERE ARE JUST SOME OF THE GROUPS THAT HAVE SHAPED BUFFALO OVER THE YEARS

## Group of Eighteen:

The Group of 18 was a group of top local business executives formed by Bob Wilmers, then CEO of First Empire (now M&T Bank) and Stanford Lipsey, publisher of the Buffalo News, in the 1980s.



## Downtown 2030

Though there is no obvious successor to 43x79 emerging, one group that may have such ambitions is the Downtown Roundtable, now called Downtown 2030, a group advocating for downtown development led by Kyle Ciminelli

## 43x79 Group

After the Group of 18, the 43x79 Group, came together in the late 1990s. 43x79 has not achieved the notoriety of the Group of 18 and it does not appear to be especially active, though that may be because its activities are not reported on.

ALL WHITE  
CIS-MEN

THE NEXT  
GENERATION

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# DELAWARE AVENUE HOT SPOTS

Back in the day, Delaware Avenue was called “Millionaires Row” because of all the mansions that line the avenue from Tupper to Delavan. Today, we can call it “Billionaire’s Row” because of all the hot spots and watering holes of the Buffalo elite!

## **City Hall: 65 Niagara Square**



- City Hall is the homebase for various City agencies, elected officials and offices.
- The City Council occupies the 13th floor, including Council chambers and each City Council member’s offices.
- The Mayor’s office and the offices of their senior advisors and officials reside on the second floor of City Hall.
- The Office of Strategic Planning, which is responsible for City’s development, planning and zoning, environmental affairs and real estate business, is located on the 9th floor of City Hall.

## **The Statler Hotel, 107 Delaware Ave**

- Once one of Buffalo’s most beautiful and luxurious hotels, the Statler has been in redevelopment for over a decade. In 2020, developer Douglas Jemal purchased the building, allegedly planning to redevelop the site into mixed-use apartments, offices and grand ballrooms.
- The Statler sits just around Niagara Square from City Hall, making its bar a hot-spot watering hall for Buffalo electeds, agency heads and rank and file staff after work. One has been known to spot local developers and other members of the Buffalo elite knocking a few back and rubbing elbows with their City Hall compatriots.





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## Delaware North, 250 Delaware Ave



- Built in 2015 by Uniland Development, the global headquarters of the Delaware North corporation sits at the corner of Chippewa and Delaware in Downtown Buffalo. Not only does the building serve as the headquarters for the international concessions corporation, it also hosts the upscale Westin Hotel, United Bank of

Switzerland Financial Services, Key Bank and the Department of Homeland Security (aka ICE).

- Many high-dollar political fundraisers and other meetups for the Buffalo elite are often held at the massive 12-story building, including a 2017 (\$5,000 a plate) lunch fundraiser for former President Donald Trump.
- The building is a frequent target of local demonstrations due to its connection to Jeremy Jacobs, Uniland and the Montante family, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Homeland Security.

## The Buffalo Club, 388 Delaware

- Not just anyone can join: sponsorship by existing members is required, plus a \$10,000 initiation fee, annual dues of \$5,000, and charges for virtually every service offered at the club.
- The high bar for entry helps create an exclusive atmosphere for the region's elite to mix, mingle, and network away from the Buffalo riff-raff.
- The club plays host to a wide range of dinners, parties, networking events, seminars, and other activities. Cigar humidors and wine lockers are available for rent, so members are afforded the opportunity to host their friends with a personal touch. Semi-formal and business casual attire is required throughout most of the facility.



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## **THE ROLE OF HOSPITAL, UNIVERSITY & GOVERNMENT JOBS**

Since the closure of factories, government and education and health services now account for 34% of the jobs in the region. Of the top 10 employers in the region, 5 are government entities.

The next biggest employer in Buffalo are hospitals and universities. Places like the University of Buffalo, Kaleida Health and Catholic Health employ thousands of people, and the disparity in pay for the small group of top earning executives and the rank and file workers is huge.

Given the central role of government and nonprofit employers in the local economy, those in power take special interest in influencing and leveraging them to their own ends.

You might be thinking, “wait, how can nonprofits and the government be making billionaires money?” Well, the offices we rent, the buildings we build, and the places we shop all need to be owned by someone - and the Buffalo elite always seem to find themselves on the winning side of those contracts...

**So while it is true that hospitals, universities and the government are creating jobs, we have to ask: who is making the real money here, and why isn't the wealth flowing down to everyday Buffalonians who do the hard work?**

## NONPROFIT BOARDS AND PHILANTHROPY:

**Nonprofit organizations** serve the public good without aiming to make a profit. They can include advocacy groups, schools, healthcare facilities, and more. Nonprofits have specific rules, such as not endorsing political candidates, and are governed by boards.

**Publicly-held corporations** divide ownership into stocks for the public. Public boards, like nonprofit boards, set strategic direction and perform fiduciary, administrative, and advisory roles.

Nonprofit board seats are a major way that the Buffalo elite stay connected to one another socially, financially and strategically. By flooding some of Buffalo's most influential nonprofit boards, this network of individuals and businesses exert their influence and resources across various sectors throughout Buffalo and WNY.

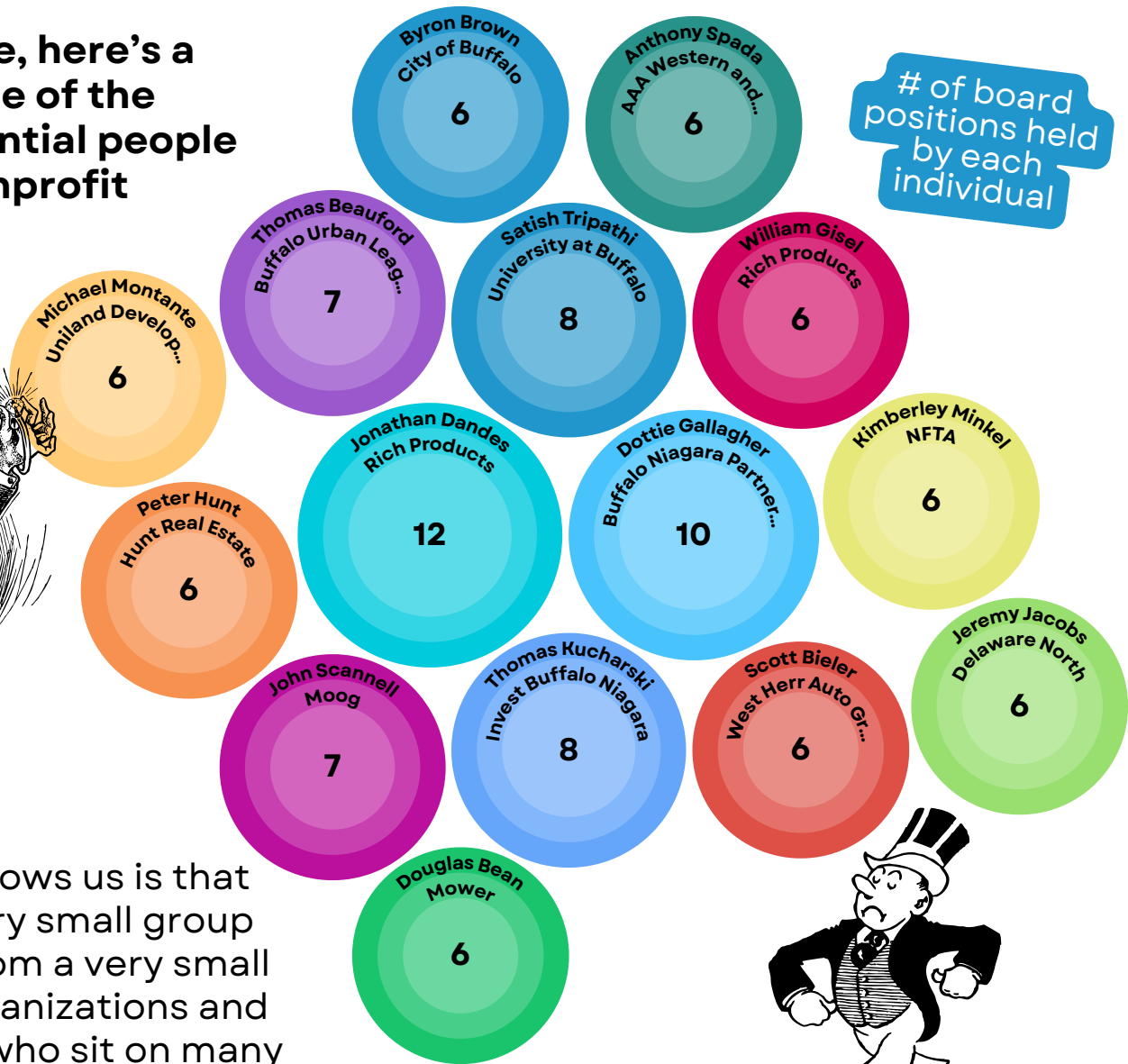
Remember, too, that many of our major institutions in Buffalo operate as nonprofits. Kaleida and Catholic Health hospitals, the University of Buffalo and the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, the Buffalo AKG and Visit Buffalo Niagara are all nonprofit organizations. In addition, the elite sit on the boards of publicly-held corporations like M&T bank or National Fuel.

Charitable giving by the Buffalo elite does a few things. One, their donations are a tax write-off. Two, when major players give money to organizations or to foundations, they can put strings onto what the money can be used for. Maybe the money means the nonprofit cannot speak out about abortion, or pollution, or call out local billionaires for their role in our oppression. And three, donations to nonprofits can help to clean up a bad actor's image in the public eye.

Say, hypothetically, your company's pollution caused hundreds of children to develop blood cancers, but then you donate millions to a children's charity, you don't look like as much of a horrible person in the public eye.

By looking at the boards of powerful organizations - and the board memberships held by powerful people - we can start to see just how interconnected the power structure really is.

For example, here's a web of some of the most influential people on local nonprofit boards:



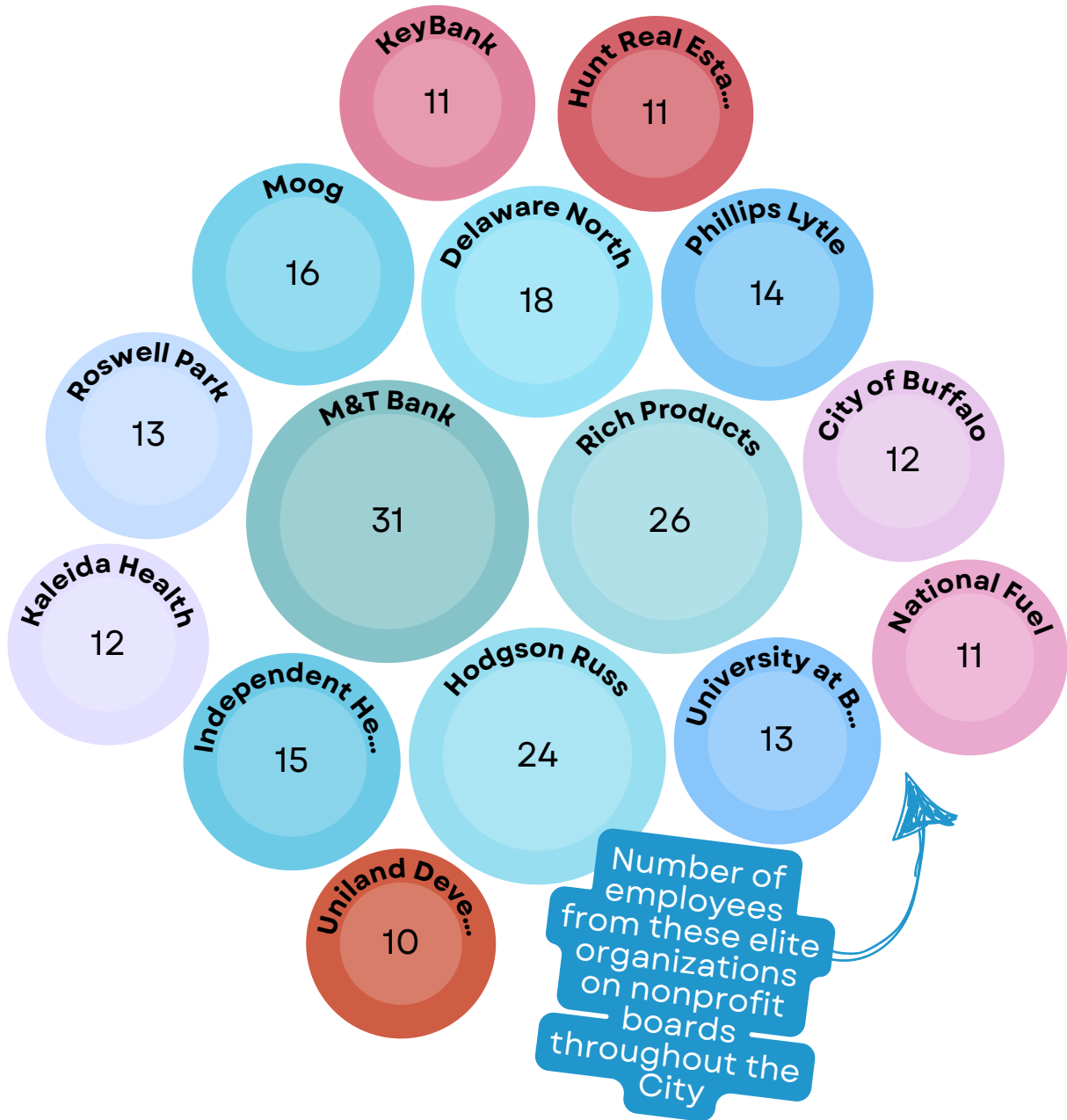
What this shows us is that there is a very small group of people from a very small group of organizations and businesses who sit on many different boards of organizations throughout Buffalo and WNY.

They are tight knit, organized and deeply connected to the major players and institutions in our communities. They are also overwhelmingly white and male but represent institutions that are increasingly diverse.

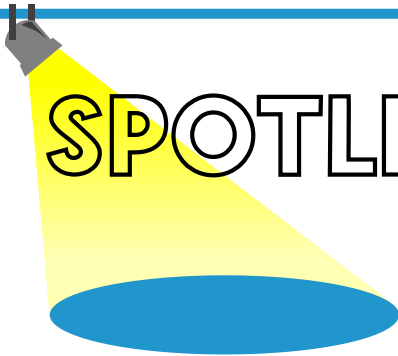


**SHOULD SUCH A SMALL, UNACCOUNTABLE GROUP HAVE SO MUCH POWER?**

Or, when looking at top organizations, government entities, institutions and corporations, we see that large numbers of their employees sit on influential boards across the city - giving them the opportunity to shape decisions and agendas.



**THESE ARE JUST TWO EXAMPLES OF THE WAY POWER MAPPING CAN HELP US UNDERSTAND WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON!**

A graphic of a spotlight with a grey handle and a yellow beam of light shining down onto a blue oval on the ground.

# SPOTLIGHT: **THE BUFFALO NIAGARA PARTNERSHIP**

Located just 2 blocks from City Hall at 257 W Genesee St, the Buffalo Niagara Partnership is the leading voice of business in the city and region, and for several decades has been the dominant policy-planning and advocacy vehicle for the local corporate elite.

The Partnership, as it is known, plays an important role in dictating the terms of the local policy debate, advancing key priorities for its member businesses, and shaping the narrative about the local economy. Its advocacy agenda is a convenient window into the local power structure's priorities for the region.

For the most part, the Partnership's tune has remained unchanged for the past thirty years. They believe that the region's economy is in poor shape because taxes and regulation make it a bad place to do business, and local and state policymakers need to cut taxes, reduce regulation, and give big business everything it seeks, including generous government subsidies, in order to reverse course.

The Buffalo Niagara Partnership acts as an advocacy vehicle, formalizing and advancing plans of the Buffalo Elite. The organization was created by the powerful and notorious Group of 18 in the 1990s, acting as Buffalo's Chamber of Commerce.

Though it can be difficult to figure out who weilds power at the BNP, the following are the top three circles of "major investors" as listed on the Partnership's website (it does not disclose what level of giving is required for membership in each circle):

- Chairman's circle: Delaware North, Highmark WNY, KeyBank, M&T Bank, Moog, Buffalo Bills / Buffalo Sabres / Pegula Sports & Entertainment
- President's circle: Independent Health, National Fuel, Rich Products
- Leadership circle: Bank of America, Charter Communications, HSBC, National Grid, Tops, Univera, University at Buffalo

The current Executive Director is Dottie Gallagher.

## ALPHABET SOUP OF AGENCIES AND OFFICES:

### ECIDA

The Erie County Industrial Development Agency provides tax incentives to businesses investing in Erie County

### OSP

The Office of Strategic Planning in Buffalo coordinates city development activities through four divisions: Development, Real Estate, Planning & Zoning, and Environmental Affairs

### BURA

The City of Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency oversees and funds community development projects, especially rehabs of old buildings

### NFTA

The Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA) is the public agency responsible for operating most public transportation services in the Buffalo-Niagara Falls metropolitan area. This includes metro rail, busses and the airport

### ECHDC

The Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation was set up at the request of local billionaire Robert Rich. It oversees development along Buffalo's waterfront, including the inner and outer harbors

### BUDC

The Buffalo Urban Development Corporation "(BUDC) is the City of Buffalo's not-for-profit development agency, reclaiming distressed land and buildings for future development"

### ESD

Empire State Development (ESD) is a NYS office set up to give money, support and other incentives to NYS businesses. They are based in Albany with offices throughout NYS. Buffalo Billion money came from ESD

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# OUR CITY OUR ISSUES

**WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN, WHEN IT COMES TO  
THE ISSUES WE AT OUR CITY CARE ABOUT MOST?**



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# HOUSING

Real estate developers play a big and very visible role in the local power structure. They are made up of connected individuals in the Buffalo web of power, all of which have a stake in local real estate market. These interests include the banks that lend to them, the investors that take ownership stakes in their projects, the law firms that service them, and the corporations that occupy their buildings.

Real estate tycoons and developers make money in the short term by buying, flipping, building, renting and selling land and buildings. Where the real money is, though, is in something called “real estate financialization” and speculation.

**Real estate financialization** basically means that big landlords and corporations now see houses more as a financial asset, like a stock or a savings account, than they do as a real place where people live. They see homes and rental units as poker chips that they can hold, play or cash in to make themselves more money.

**Real estate speculation** is what they do with those poker chips they hold. Do they play them, jacking up rents as high as they can before people stop paying? Or do they hold them with the gamble that they will be worth double or triple the amount in the years to come?

Developers love Buffalo because we have a lot of land and buildings they can gobble up for cheap, jack up the prices of rent once they have the majority, and then sit on in the hope that Buffalo and WNY will someday be a hot-spot place that rich people from around the world will want to, or need to, live. Its like they've hit the jackpot, and all of us are left to pay the bill.

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# IMMIGRATION

Although we are thousands of miles from the U.S.'s southern border with Mexico, Buffalo's proximity to Canada means that local and federal branches of national law enforcement agencies (ICE, Border Patrol) have massive resources and extreme latitude in law enforcement.

While it is dangerous to be undocumented anywhere in the US, the concentration of ICE, Customs and Border Patrol and Homeland Security officers in Buffalo and WNY makes it even riskier. For what would be a routine traffic stop for many people could easily turn into a nightmare of immigration court, detention and possible deportation for many members of our community.

The Buffalo Police Department has an active collaboration agreement with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Patrol, only adding to a culture of fear, over-policing and under-resourcing for our people.

Additionally, although there are only twenty-six Homeland Security Investigation in the entire U.S., one of them is located in Buffalo. Our federal detention center in Batavia currently houses hundreds of migrants transported here from the southern border.

The unique situation at the northern border has garnered relatively little attention from national media or advocacy groups, allowing certain abuses to continue largely unchecked.

Another disturbing reality around immigration in Buffalo is the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office (and holding cells) on the 7th floor of the Delaware North Building, right next door to the luxury Westin Hotel. Delaware North CEO Jeremy Jacobs, whose net worth is estimated at about \$4.5 billion, received \$10 million in incentives to build the complex at the corner of Delaware and Chippewa.

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# ARTS AND CULTURE

There are brilliant, talented artists throughout the City of Buffalo, though you wouldn't know that's the case by looking at the City's funding priorities.

In 2022, 63% of funding for arts organizations in Buffalo went to only 5 organizations, and 4 of them are west of Main Street. That means that our artists who don't live or work in the main arts hub on Elmwood or the Theatre District aren't getting the funding they need to fund the work that enriches all of our lives.

The arts and cultural institutions of Buffalo have been an active player and contributor in the "renaissance" the city is experiencing, thus leading to increased revenue for the city. The City of Buffalo should in turn invest in these institutions as assets by committing to consistent funding for the arts through initiatives such as the American Rescue Plan.

Representation from frontline arts organizations and artist communities must be realized and maintained at all decision making tables when it comes to public art in Buffalo such as on the Buffalo City Arts Commission and the Art in Public Places Committee. **Decision-making spaces should be reflective of the communities they will serve.**

How about bringing artists to these boards instead of people like Michael Joseph, whose real estate company, Clover Management, was exposed by whistleblowers for engaging in racially discriminatory development practices? The lawsuits, which the company settled, said that the company would not develop housing in or near Black neighborhoods. One whistleblower had recordings of executives using the terms "Canadian factor" and "Canadians" as code for Black people. Though Joseph was forced to resign as chair of the Roswell Park board, he remains on the board of the Buffalo AKG.

**WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO GET THE ARTS FUNDED IN BUFFALO?**

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# CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

Buffalo's history of industrial manufacturing has had a deep impact on our region. From our cultural values, how our neighborhoods are designed and, of course, the legacy of jobs and unions in this City. A huge, often overlooked impact of this legacy, however, is the ongoing contamination of the land, air and waterways from these zombie factories and facilities sprinkled all throughout Buffalo.

In 2024, more than half of Buffalonians live within one mile of a hazardous waste site.

Exposure to hazardous chemicals in our air, water and soil have been proven to be linked to increased cases of cancer, autoimmune, respiratory and other diseases. Buffalo is a hotspot for lead poisoning and asthma, especially in low income communities and communities of color in the City. Right now, your zip code can dictate your opportunities to live a healthy life.

At the same time, we are dealing with health challenges because of our environment. We are experiencing the escalating impacts of climate change in our communities. For Buffalo, climate change looks like a Lake Erie that stays warm for longer. Combined with shifting weather patterns and arctic blasts of freezing air, the lake effect snow machine operates at full blast way more often than it did even 10-15 years ago. The deadly 2022 December blizzard that claimed the lives of over 50 of our community members is just one example of how climate change is impacting our City.

**SO WHY ISN'T THE CITY OF BUFFALO DOING MORE TO PREPARE, PROTECT AND CLEAN UP THIS MESS? WHO PROFITS FROM OUR SUFFERING?**

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# PUBLIC FUNDS

Potholes, closed pools, uprooted trees, unplowed streets, warming centers losing power, broken fire trucks...the list of rundown, unfunded infrastructure in Buffalo goes on and on. Yet, despite the deadly consequences of shoddy infrastructure, City leaders refuse to raise revenue and invest our own tax dollars in our quality of life.

Instead, according to our friends at Investigative Post, “in 2021, the city collected less in taxes than it did 15 years earlier” and yet “costs increased at twice the rate of inflation in that period”. The City makes up this gap by continuously going into debt and borrowing against the Buffalo Public Schools fund. Despite cries by community for changes, the City stays firm in their immoral budgetary plans and we all suffer for it.

**A subsidy** is a benefit given to an individual, business, or institution, usually by the government, to promote a public objective. Subsidies can be direct, like cash payments, or indirect, like tax breaks.

Generous government subsidies for real estate development (fronting as “economic development”) are a core priority of the local power structure. There are SO many ways that these funds are handed out, from direct grants of cash and property, tax-free bond financing, tax-free zones, and sales, mortgage, and real property tax exemptions.

The power structure argues that subsidies are intended to support job creation, though studies have shown that they actually provide little in the way of an economic boost. Big businesses like to threaten to leave Buffalo and WNY if they don't get these handouts. Take the owner of the Buffalo Bills, Terry Pegula. He was seeking \$1.4 billion in subsidies for a new stadium, his spokesperson issued a clear threat, saying “that the City of Buffalo and the State are going to have to decide if they want a team.” The Bills and Pegula, who is worth \$6 billion, were successful in obtaining nearly \$1 billion in subsidies.

**IMAGINE IF THESE BUSINESSES ACTUALLY PAID THEIR FAIR SHARE IN TAXES—WHAT COULD BE POSSIBLE FOR BUFFALO?**

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# TRANSPORTATION

Reliable, accessible and affordable transportation are a pillar of modern cities. Having the ability to get to where you need to go on time and with dignity isn't a luxury for the few, it is a right for all of us.

Except in Buffalo. If you use public transportation in Buffalo, you know how difficult and sometimes dangerous it can be to get around our city. From unshoveled bus stops causing falls and accidents, limited routes, stops and times for buses and trains and the lack of democratic decision making in the agency from riders themselves, transportation in Buffalo isn't getting us where we want to go. We deserve better!

The city has granted significant tax breaks to real estate developers. A review of ten major developers' portfolios shows they are paying about \$6 million per year less in taxes than they would without these programs, at a rate about 33% less than the city's commercial tax rate. **Meanwhile, it would cost the City about \$3 million per year to implement a municipal sidewalk snow removal program**

Key members of the local power structure often take on official government roles as the board members of local and state authorities, which play an important role in setting policy and overseeing economic development in the region. **Political contributions tend to play an important role in the public authority board appointment process, as top donors are often rewarded with appointments.**

The Buffalo Urban Development Corporation, Erie County Industrial Development Agency, and the NFTA are among the local public authorities and agencies where local power elites occupy important policymaking and public oversight positions, despite being unelected.

**SO WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO GET YOU WHERE YOU WANT TO GO? DONATIONS OR DEMOCRACY? WELL....**

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# WHATS NEXT?

**Buffalo's elite think that they have this City in the bag, but this is OUR city and we're not giving up the fight.**

## **KNOWLEDGE IS POWER**

Buffalo's elite prefer to move behind the scenes and out of the public eye. By reading this report, you have already taken the first step in unmasking these power brokers, and taking the power back.

## **KNOW WHO YOUR LOCAL POLICY MAKERS ARE**

Save their phone numbers and emails to your contact lists. Follow Our City Action Buffalo to stay up to date on deals our local policy makers are trying to make as quietly as possible, and get loud when when they do.

## **EVERY YEAR IS AN ELECTION YEAR**

We know it's not exciting, we know it's not sexy. Some might even say that voting doesn't work- but the sad truth is that we wouldn't know. Why? Because voter turnout is abysmally low, especially for local elections.

**Local elections are the most important elections you can participate in!** Often times these races are decided by dozens, if not a handful, of votes. Your vote might just be the deciding factor. Primaries, which usually take place in the summer, are more important than generals, which usually take place in November. **Make a Plan, vote early, bring a neighbor.**

## **VOTE WITH YOUR DOLLAR**

Now that you know who controls what in the city of Buffalo, make an effort to spend your dollars where they really count. Support small businesses and worker-owned co-ops. Especially ones that are women, lgbtq+ and minority owned. (<https://www.cooperationbuffalo.org/our-co-ops>)

Everyone has something to contribute and all are welcome.

## CONTRIBUTE WHAT YOU CAN!



- Attending protests
- Calling their council member,
- Speaking in council chambers
- Volunteering to campaign either through door knocking or phone banking, or both!

- Research
- Artistic and musical contributions (custom artwork, photography, videography, DJs, performers)
- Web Design
- Writing
- Public speaking
- Data analysis
- Legal expertise
- Communications, education, advocacy experience



- Donate money to mutual funds, bail funds, legal funds, progressive political candidates, certain grassroots people-led political city action groups (cough cough wink wink :))
- Donate in-kind gifts (see talents section above!)
- Donate your resources. Do you have a space that can host fundraisers? Do you have a car and can donate rides? Do you have equipment you no longer need, or can temporarily lend to us?
- Do you have a large social media following? Maybe you just have a small or medium following? It doesn't matter! Re-share our posts to get the word out! Every like, comment and share helps us reach more people. And best of all it's free!
- Talk to your friends, family and neighbors about us. Get them on board. Bring a friend to an event. Convince your well-to-do uncle to make a donation. Leverage your network!



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# OUR CITY OUR POWER

**BELOW ARE SOME TOOLS TO SUPPORT YOU AND YOUR ORGANIZATIONS IN BUILDING POWERFUL, STRATEGIC AND IMPACTFUL CAMPAIGNS THAT BUILD OUR POWER FOR OUR CITY! PLEASE EMAIL US IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE!**

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# POWER MAPPING TOOLS

Power mapping is a tool that we use to build, run and win campaigns. Power maps help us to get clear on and visualize our targets, allies, opponents and enemies in our campaigns so that we can build sound strategies to achieve our goals.

**If you would like even more support and training from Our City, please reach out!**

## **POWER:**

Access to resources and to decision makers to get what you want done, the ability to influence others, the ability to define reality for yourself and potentially for others. Power can be visible, hidden, or invisible. Power can show up as power over others, power with others, and/or power within.

## **POLITICAL POWER:**

The ability to make decisions on policy, law and public budgets. These can be elected officials or their staff or people who work at other public agencies.

## **RESOURCE POWER:**

The ability to make decisions and control/allocate resources to groups of people. These can be people in public agencies (like NY's Homes and Community Renewal) who control budgets or they can be people like wealthy developers

## **POLITICAL POWER:**

The ability to shape public opinion, worldview and ideology and culture. This can be the media or people who make art or hold cultural traditions and rituals in the community.

## **COMMUNITY POWER**

Organized people, or people who have similar interests or enemies who can be brought together for a common goal. This can include community organizing organizations or tenant unions.

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## Key terms:

### STRATEGY

Our plan of action to win our campaign. Every campaign will have a multitude of strategies; a base building strategy, a narrative strategy, a legal strategy, a legislative strategy, a direct action strategy, etc.

### TACTIC

The specific actions we will take to achieve our goals.

### CONSTITUANT

A person or group of people who are being impacted by the problem. They will directly gain something when the problem is fixed.

### ALLY

The people who are not directly impacted by the problem but who agree with us and want/should be on our side.

### OPPONENT

The people or groups of people who have something to gain by things staying the same or are benefiting from our problem.

### TARGET

The person who has the decision making power to give us what we want. THIS MUST BE A PERSON!

### ENEMY

The person who is in the way of getting what we want/who directly benefits from the problem. This needs to be a person and our job is to make them toxic to be in alignment with.

**NAME**

**BUSINESS NAME**



**FIELD THEY ARE IN**

## TARGET OR ENEMY

### WHAT DO THEY CARE ABOUT?

Body

### HOW DO THEY BENEFIT?

Body

### HOW DO THEY WIELD THEIR INFLUENCE?

Body

### KEY FACTS

Biz location

where they live

political party

Political donations since 2016

Memberships & Affiliations:

### QUOTES & FUN FACTS

Body

**CARL PALADINO**

**ELLICOTT DEVELOPMENT**



**REAL ESTATE DEVELOPER**

## ENEMY

### WHAT DO THEY CARE ABOUT?

Carl Paladino is an experienced businessman and real estate developer. He has come out in favor of reduced taxes, subsidies for development and a general pro-business free market outlook for Buffalo and WNY.

Paladino is an avid Trump supporter and has said vile, racist, sexist comments both in public and behind closed doors.

While on the Buffalo School Board, Paladino was pro-charter school and encouraged BPS to sell underused school buildings to developers to turn into market rate housing.

### HOW DO THEY BENEFIT?

Paladino owns 306 properties in Buffalo, valuing at \$254,377,934.

### HOW DO THEY WIELD THEIR INFLUENCE?

Paladino has a strong base of support amongst South Buffalo residents and some Italian-Americans.

### KEY FACTS

Headquartered at the Ellicott Square Building, 295 Main St, Buffalo

Lives in South Buffalo

Republican

Political donations: \$992,325 from 2014-2024

Former Buffalo School Board member

### QUOTES & FUN FACTS

Once said that Hitler “the kind of leader we need today.” He had made this remark in a podcast interview with Peter Hunt.

# **CHRIS SCANLON**

## ***ACTING MAYOR OF BUFFALO***



### ***POLITICIAN***



## TARGET

### WHAT DO THEY CARE ABOUT?

- Scanlon was appointed to the Buffalo Common Council in May 2012. He filled the South District seat vacated by Michael “Mickey” Kearns who had left to join the NYS Assembly.
- His original appointment was criticized as a patronage hire, because of his lack of relevant experience.
- Scanlon’s dad is the late John “Scanoots” Scanlon, a top advisor to former Buffalo mayor Jimmy Griffin. He was also a supporter of subsequent mayors Tony Masiello and Byron Brown.

### KEY FACTS

Acting Mayor of Buffalo (2024)

South Buffalo Council Member 2012-2024

Democrat

### HOW DO THEY BENEFIT?

- Decisions have been developer and business-friendly.
- Scanlon represents South Buffalo’s extensive patronage network of City employees.
- Most of his family, including his wife, is on the City payroll.

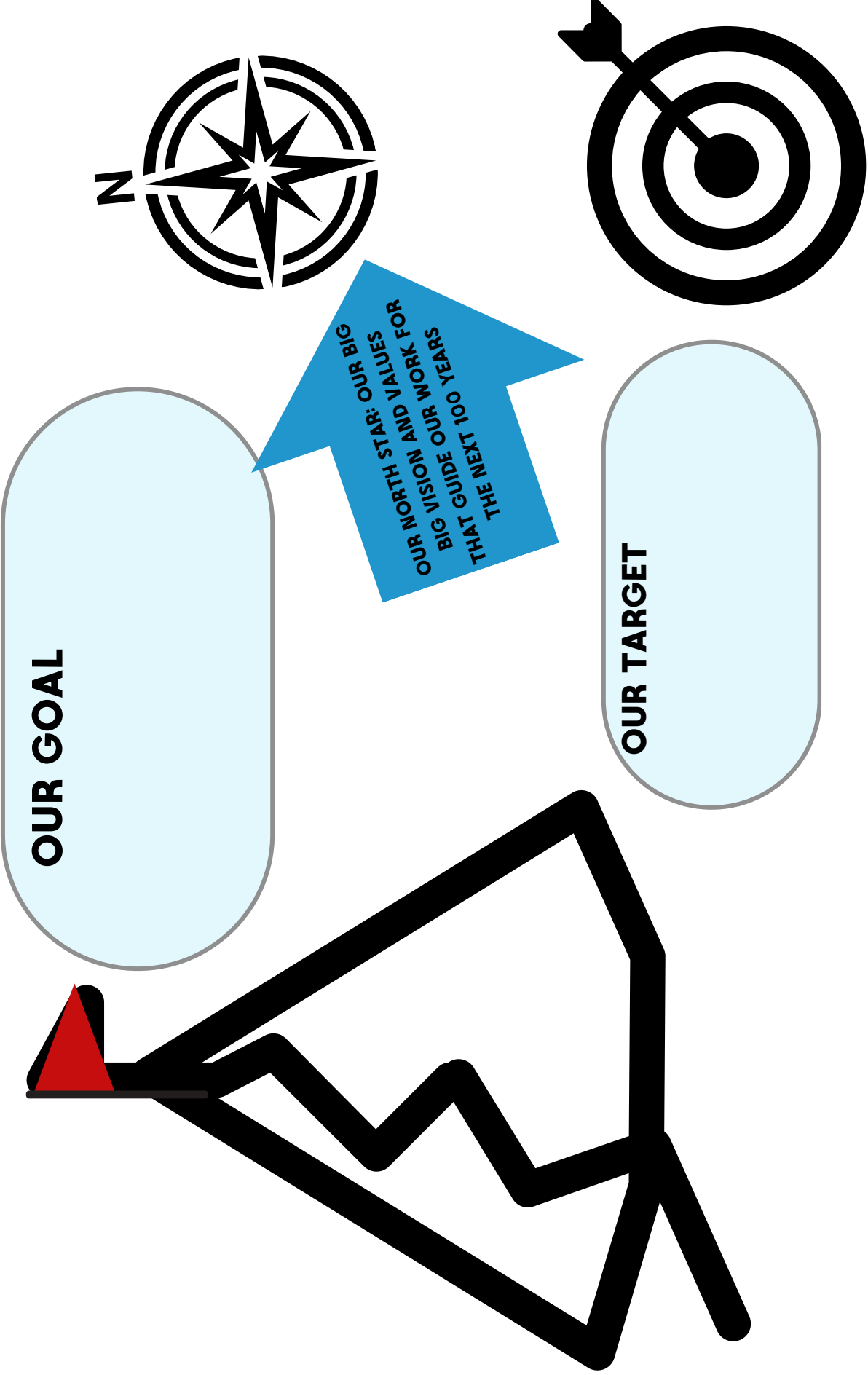
### QUOTES & FUN FACTS

After the murder of Mike Brown, Scanlon wrote an Op-Ed to the Buffalo News asking “exactly when did we begin treating criminals better than our men and women in blue?”. Read the whole op-ed (which has mysteriously disappeared from the Buffalo News online archives at [bit.ly/scanlon14](http://bit.ly/scanlon14))

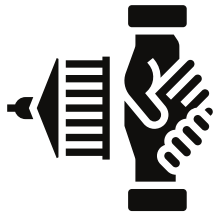
### HOW DO THEY WIELD THEIR INFLUENCE?

- South Buffalo, the district he has represented for the past 12 years, leans centrist/conservative, with 39% of South Buffalo voters supporting Donald Trump in the 2020 election compared to just 19% city-wide.
- A constituency that is important to Scanlon: the Buffalo Fire Department and Buffalo Police Department. He is an outspoken advocate for those constituencies and his policy proposals reflect that.

# POWER MAPPING: PART 1



# POWER MAPPING: PART 2



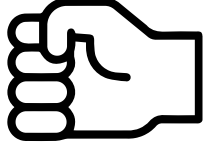
POLITICAL POWER



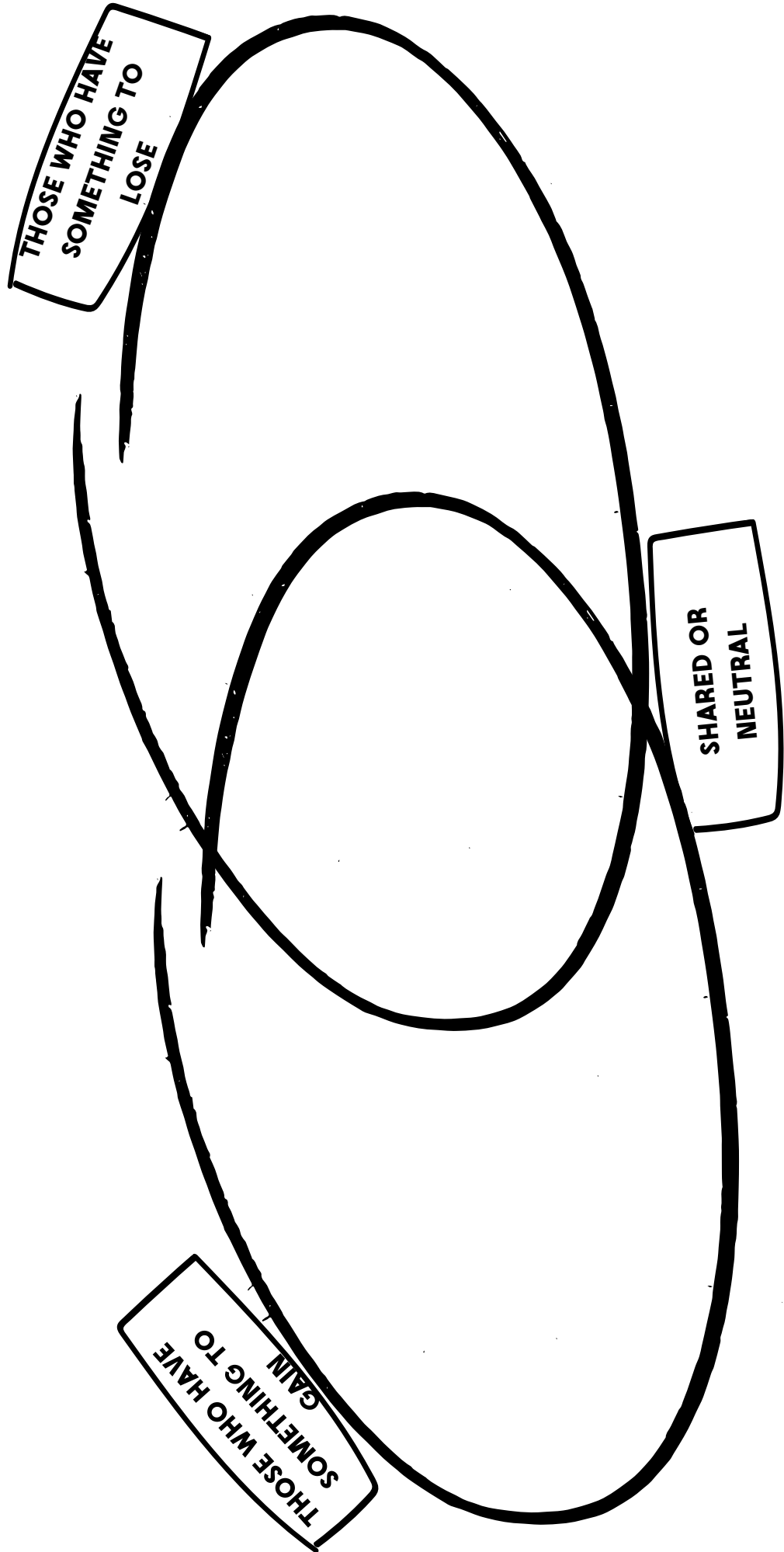
RESOURCE POWER



CULTURAL POWER



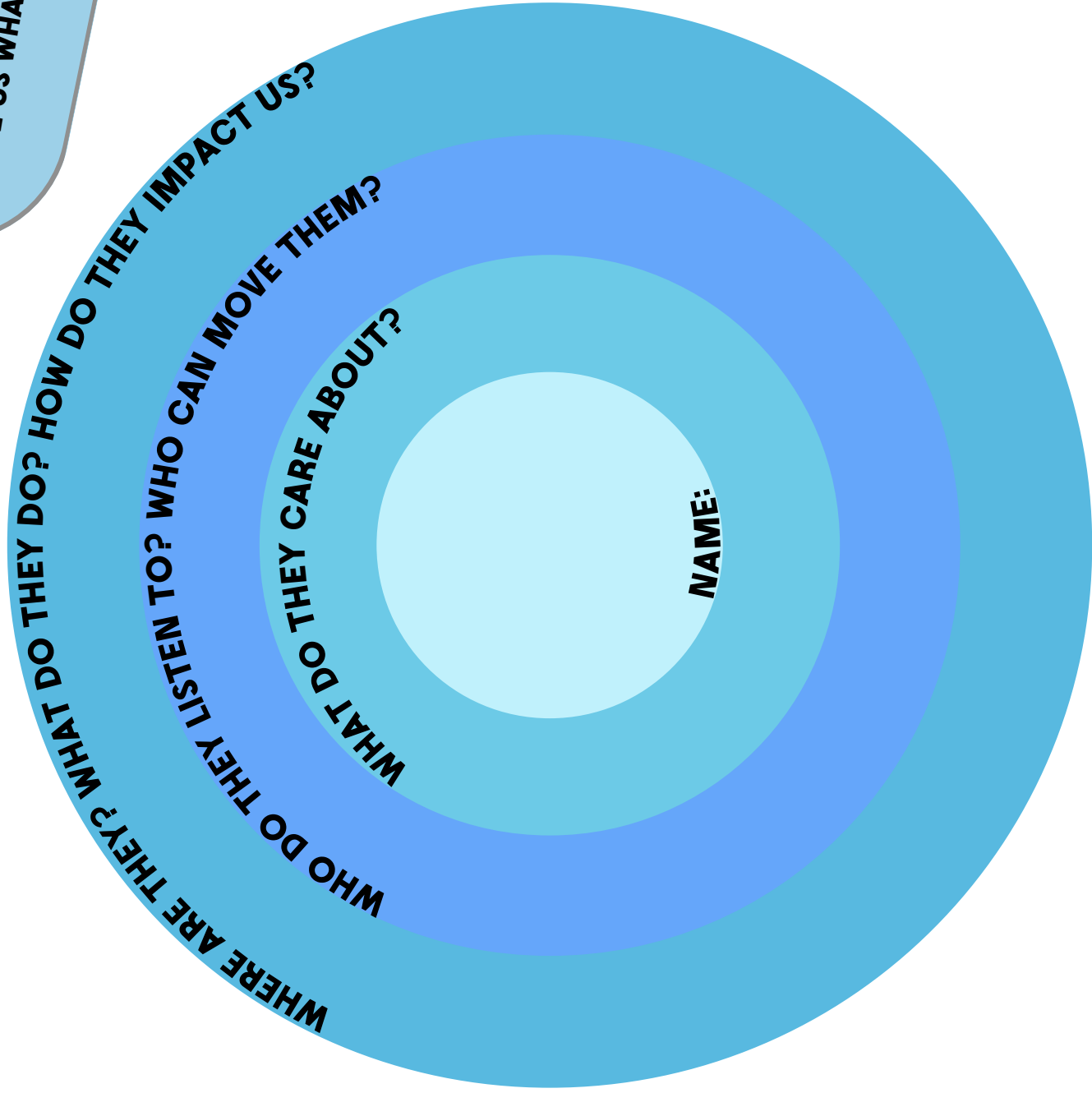
COMMUNITY POWER



# POWER MAPPING: PART 3

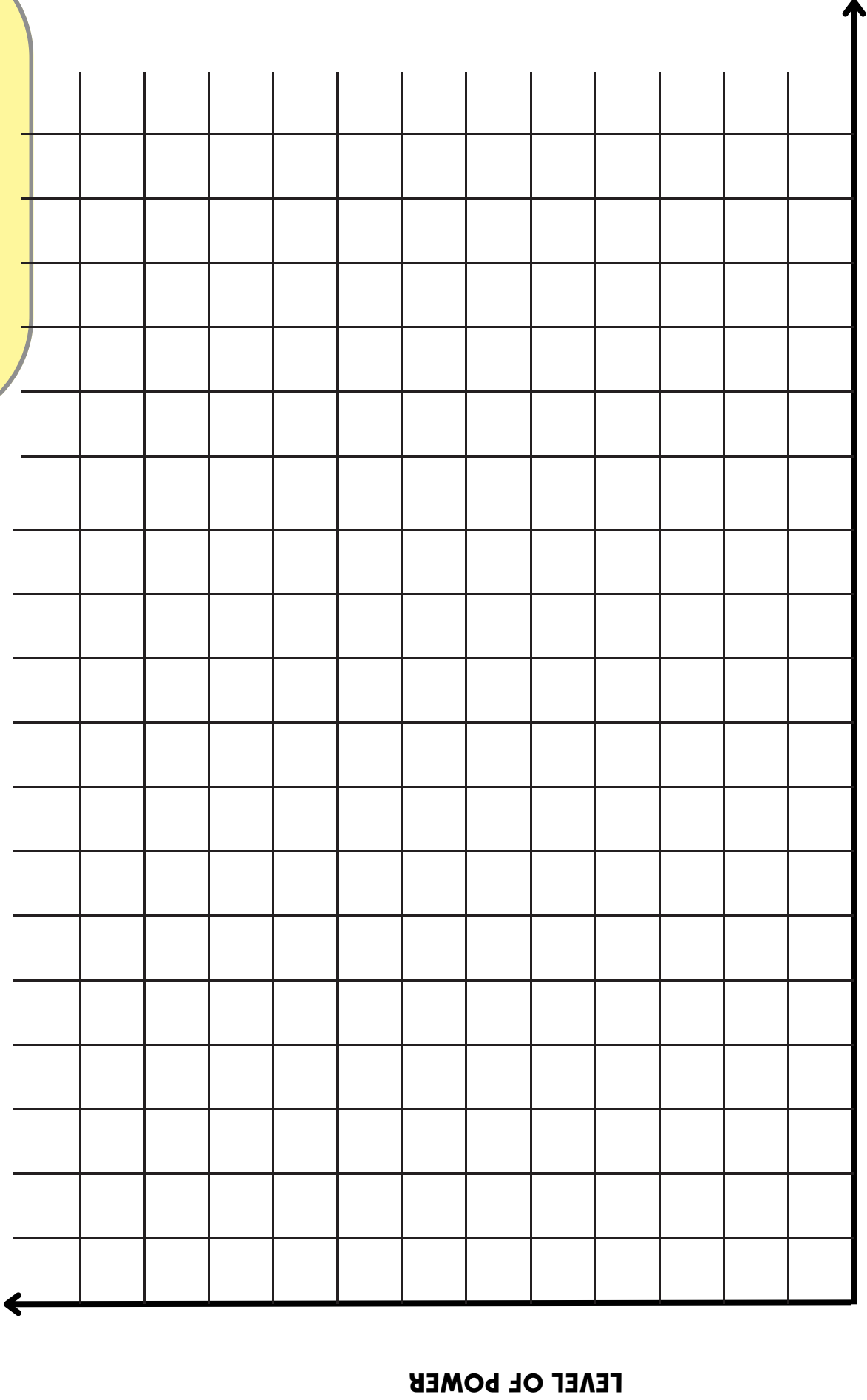
**TARGET:**

**TARGET: THE PERSON WHO HAS THE DECISION MAKING POWER TO GIVE US WHAT WE WANT.**



# POWER MAPPING: PART 4

OUR GOAL:



AGAINST US

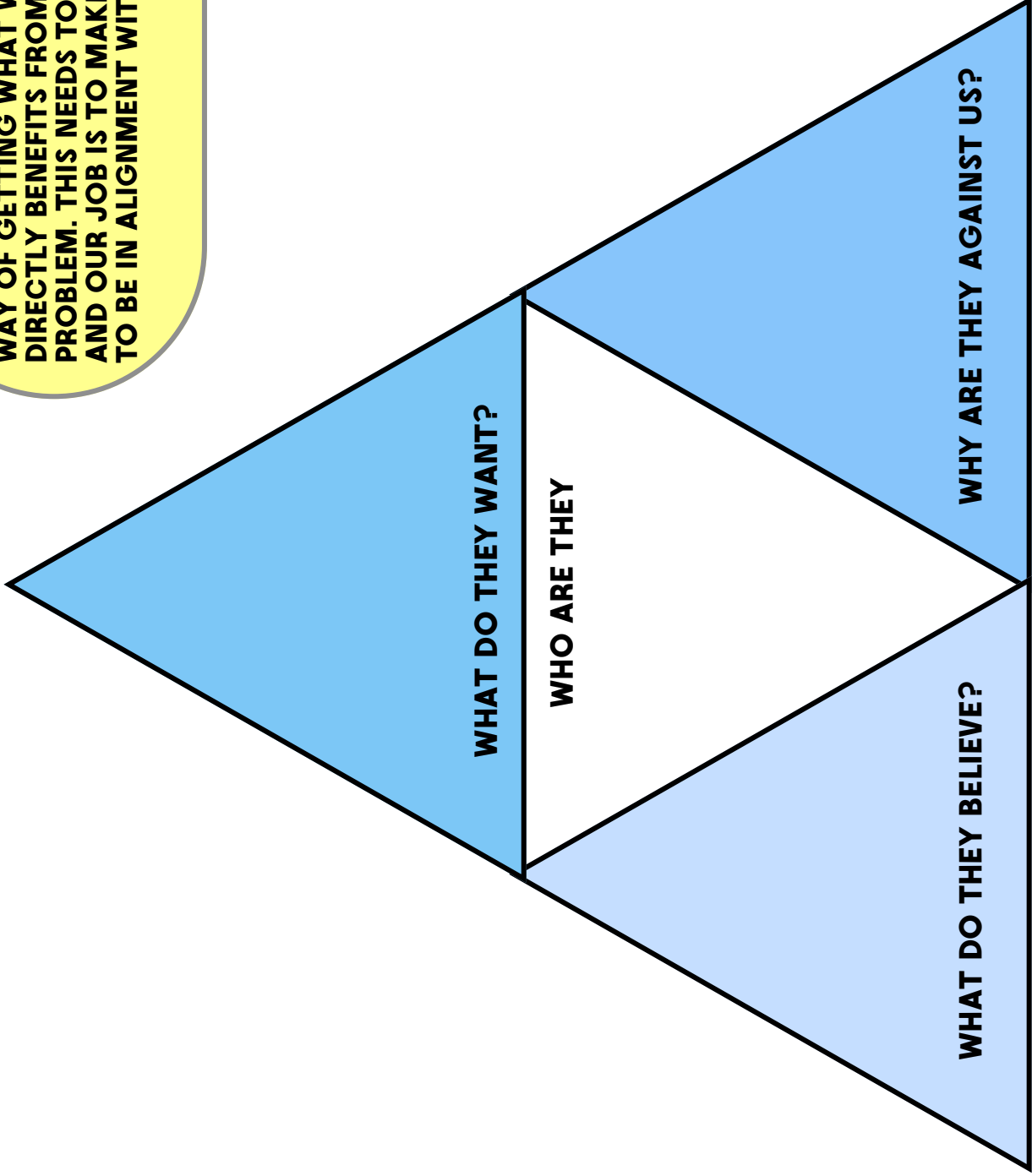
ON OUR SIDE

# POWER MAPPING: PART 5

<b>WHO DO WE NEED?</b>	<b>WHY?</b>	<b>HOW DO WE REACH THEM?</b>

# POWER MAPPING: PART 6

**ENEMY: THE PERSON WHO IS IN THE WAY OF GETTING WHAT WE WANT/WHO DIRECTLY BENEFITS FROM THE PROBLEM. THIS NEEDS TO BE A PERSON AND OUR JOB IS TO MAKE THEM TOXIC TO BE IN ALIGNMENT WITH**



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# THIS IS OUR CITY

**OUR CITY  
ACTION  
BUFFALO**

Visit [www.ourcityactionbuffalo.com/take-action](http://www.ourcityactionbuffalo.com/take-action) to find out how you can become a part of our team and make a difference

WWW.OURCITYACTIONBUFFALO.COM  
@OURCITYBUFFALO

