



WHO RULES BUFFALO?

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE
LOCAL POWER
STRUCTURE



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ABOUT OUR CITY ACTION BUFFALO:

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

CREDITS:

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I: INTRODUCTION

Byron Brown's resignation as mayor and the upcoming 2025 mayoral election present an important opportunity to assess questions of power and policymaking in Buffalo. Whose interests and priorities did city hall serve during Brown's nearly 19-year tenure? Who benefited from his leadership? And how might the city be more responsive to the needs of the people who live here?

To hear Brown tell it, the city of Buffalo has experienced remarkable progress under his leadership. In his 2024 State of the City address, he pointed to waterfront development, population gains, and a "wave of investment and confidence" like never before.¹ One of his signature announcements was that Buffalo had submitted a bid to host the renowned Sundance Film Festival.

But there is an extraordinary disconnect between Brown's story of Buffalo and the realities the city is facing. Buffalo remains mired in poverty, with the third-highest poverty rate in the country and a child poverty rate surpassing 40%.² The city is experiencing an affordable housing crisis, with more than half of tenants in the city qualifying as housing-cost burdened.³ And it is mired in a mounting financial crisis, with a budget gap of up to \$55 million looming next year.⁴

While celebrating the city's supposed renaissance, Brown prioritized a course of action that largely ignored these crises, and in many ways contributed to them: failing to tax wealthy property owners, intensifying policing, and boosting developers with subsidies and other support.

Who has this served? Whose priorities has Brown looked out for, as mayor? In other words: who really rules Buffalo?

This report documents how Buffalo, like other US cities, has a dominant power structure, rooted in business and real estate interests, that wields an inordinate level of influence over the direction of the city. In Buffalo, this rich and powerful elite is organized around business advocacy vehicles like the Buffalo Niagara Partnership and social institutions like the Buffalo Club; controls key aspects of the local economy; exerts political power via campaign contributions and a number of other mechanisms; and wields special influence over the local narrative of the region.

While particular power blocs within the city – factions of organized labor, church and faith groups, political networks, and community activist groups, for example – jockey for influence and sometimes achieve victories, none holds the dominant level of influence enjoyed by the city's rich and powerful elite. In prioritizing their interests while promising trickle-down benefits for everyone else, Brown advanced a governing paradigm favored by this dominant power structure.

This is not to say Buffalo's elite is all-powerful. Relative to other comparable cities, the local elite appears marked by high levels of dysfunction, absenteeism, and lack of leadership and vision - perhaps one reason it has failed to achieve gains on par with the renaissance it professes.

With a transition in city government approaching, there are clear openings for local governance that prioritizes the needs of city residents over those of the rich and powerful. If that is to be achieved, Buffalo's dominant power structure needs to be understood and reckoned with. This report aims to provide a starting point for this analysis, and inform the strategic efforts necessary to make local government responsive to the residents of Buffalo, and not just its rich and powerful elite.

II: KEY TERMS AND GEOGRAPHIC, ECONOMIC, AND COMMUNITY POWER CHARACTERISTICS OF BUFFALO

The following section offers some introductory background and context in order to provide grounding for the research that follows in subsequent sections.

Key Terms in Power Structure Research

Since power is a complex topic, and power can be studied in a variety of ways, it is necessary to define a handful of key terms and research approaches at the outset.

POWER

In the words of philosopher Bertrand Russell, "power is the ability to produce intended effects." Power is not fixed and defies easy measurement - it is a moving target, achieved and expressed in relation to (and with) other people and groups. So it is necessary to use power indicators to analyze whether a particular individual or organization has power.

POWER INDICATORS

Power indicators help us determine who has power in a particular context. These indicators are guided by the following 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 indicators 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 perceptions of power are a useful indicator when combined with the others.

POWER STRUCTURE, AND POWER STRUCTURE RESEARCH

A power structure is a network of people and organizations that wield a high level of power in a particular context. Since a power structure can be mapped within any place, institution, or group (more on this below), it is important to note that this report focuses on the dominant power structure in Buffalo: the cohesive network of individuals and organizations, rooted in business and real estate interests and shared social and institutional structures, that wields much more power than other competing groups.

The tools of network analysis – mapping people, groups, and the relationships between them – augmented with research on the shared characteristics, achievements, reputations, and beliefs of the people and groups in the network are some key building blocks of power structure research.

The analysis conducted for this report draws heavily on the research methods of UC Santa Cruz sociologist William Domhoff, a leading authority in the field of power structure research. Domhoff was also an advisor to Diana Dillaway, author of *Power Failure: Politics, Patronage, and the Economic Future of Buffalo, New York*, an essential study of Buffalo's power structure during the second half of the 20th century.

GEOGRAPHIES OF POWER AND GOVERNANCE

In order to analyze who wields power in Buffalo, it is important to consider it within its larger geographic context: as the seat of Erie County, the capital of the Buffalo Niagara region, and the second largest city in New York State.

The city of Buffalo occupies an extremely important position in the larger regional context, not only as a social and economic crossroads, but also since it is widely understood as the heart of the region: this place is known as Buffalo. Following from this, the dominant power structure analyzed in this report is heavily centered in Buffalo, and wields significant influence with respect to city affairs, but is not constrained by city limits and has an impact on the region as a whole. Therefore, the analysis that follows includes corporations, organizations, and individuals that are not in the city of Buffalo, but are relevant to considerations of power in Buffalo.

Geography also comes into play when considering the levels of government relevant to life in the city of Buffalo. While the mayor is the city's most recognizable leader, city government is only one of the relevant layers of public governance: the county, state, and federal governments play an important role, as do public authorities, many of them controlled by the governor.

The city's shrunken tax base, hollowed out by the economic trends noted below, means that Buffalo is largely dependent on state and federal spending for any major initiatives. This gives other government officials, particularly the governor, enormous power to shape life in Buffalo that are not available to city government. It is one reason that the dominant power structure, as detailed in the pages that follow, invests heavily in the governor and other elected officials on the state level.

ECONOMIC TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The characteristics of Buffalo's economy have their roots in a series of historical shifts which were driven in part by national and global trends. These changes have had a significant bearing on the current shape of the local power structure.

- **Deindustrialization and capital flight.** Like many US cities, but to a more dramatic extent than most of them, the region shifted from a manufacturing-dominated economy to one that is service-based over the past fifty years. In 1950, nearly one out of two (45%) of jobs in the Buffalo area were in manufacturing, higher than the national average; by 1984, this number had dropped by more than half, and it currently stands at around 10%. This shift resulted in the loss of higher-paying, often unionized jobs, which were replaced in part by lower-paying service sector jobs. Factors contributing to the intensity of deindustrialization in Buffalo include its concentration in steel, dependence on wartime expansions, the opening of the St Lawrence Seaway and demise of the Erie Canal, and absentee ownership (Buffalo's corporate titans had sold off companies and invested elsewhere at a high rate, meaning that many major local employers were not locally controlled).

- **The rise of government, healthcare, and education as top sectors in the economy.** Due to the shift to a service economy noted above, government and education and health services now account for 34% of jobs in the region. Of the top 10 employers in the region, five are government entities (the state and federal government, city school district, University at Buffalo, and Erie County), two are private, nonprofit entities (Kaleida and Catholic Health), and three are for-profit businesses: M&T Bank, Tops, and Walmart. Given the central role of government and nonprofit employers in the local economy, the local power structure takes a special interest in influencing, governing, and leveraging them to their own ends: through leases, contracts, and subsidies and tax breaks, and also by using them to anchor and drive major speculative real estate schemes.
- **The city-suburban divide.** Suburbanization and white flight were especially dramatic in Buffalo, and have fueled deep segregation and a significant economic divide between city and suburbs: Buffalo itself is 46% white (making it a majority people of color city) and 33% Black, with 27% of residents living in poverty; surrounding towns in Erie County are 90% white and 6% Black, with 7% of residents living in poverty. 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 supports for suburban real estate development all played a role in this process. The tension between city and suburbs is sometimes apparent in dynamics and divisions within the local power structure.

OTHER POWER STRUCTURES

Though this report focuses primarily on Buffalo's dominant power structure, rooted in business and real estate interests, there are other power structures relevant to life in Buffalo. These connect with the dominant power structure to some extent, but are somewhat distinct, and less powerful. Any of these could be analyzed in far greater depth and detail, but the below provides a brief overview of political parties and factions in the city, and notes some other power players.

Political Parties:

County political party committees and their networks and processes play a particularly important role in selecting and promoting candidates and shaping local election ballots.

The most relevant such committee for the city of Buffalo is the Erie County Democratic Committee, currently chaired by Jeremy Zellner. Zellner has served as chair since 2012, and was recently re-elected unanimously to his seventh two-year term.¹³ The particular machinations that give rise to a "Democratic" party voting unanimously for a six-term incumbent are beyond the scope of this report. However, it should be noted that the committee fought some outsider candidates for committee seats in the June 2024 primary, sending out mailers that deceptively painted left-leaning challengers to party insiders as being aligned with Trump.¹⁴

Because party committees offer a built-in apparatus and funding source for candidates, their endorsements provide a major boost, often enough to deliver primary victories. Additionally, in cases where no primary is held, the endorsement is enough to put a candidate directly on the general election ballot.

Beneficiaries of this process have included Congressman Tim Kennedy and State Senator Sean Ryan, a likely candidate for mayor.¹⁵

The county's Democratic and Republican committees often cut deals with each other to issue cross-endorsements, or leave certain seats uncontested.¹⁶ This is how judicial candidates, for instance, can end up with endorsements from political parties that are supposed to be ideologically opposed to one another. The Republican Party often chooses to leave seats in the city uncontested, so as to not drive up city turnout that might have a bearing on county races.¹⁷ In 2021, however, top Republican Party operatives, including a right-wing extremist, worked in support of Mayor Byron Brown's re-election campaign.¹⁸

Political Factions and Patronage Networks

There are competing factions within the political parties, and they sometimes gain power to the point of being deemed a political machine or patronage network.

The rise of Mayor Byron Brown and Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes was facilitated by one such faction, known as Grassroots. Grassroots, led by Maurice Garner, was originally an upstart challenger to former Assemblymember Arthur Eve's power base on the East Side. Grassroots rejected Eve's advocacy for social spending, instead promoting a message of "empowerment for the black community through economic development and self-help," according to a 1992 Buffalo News article that discussed their conflicting perspectives.¹⁹

"The difference in the young people coming out now from when we were young is we were involved in social action," Eve told the Buffalo News. "These guys [from Grassroots] don't get involved in that -- protesting, fighting racism, marching. These guys are pure political entities."

More than 30 years later, Eve's critique seems prescient. Brown's pursuit of a high-paying job at a government-run gambling corporation, Off Track Betting (OTB),²⁰ is an apt way to close out a politically opportunistic career lacking in leadership vision or values. In some sense, Grassroots is coming full circle: Brown appointed Garner to the OTB board – a position that offers a stipend and health insurance – shortly after taking office as mayor, and subsequently appointed his wife; Garner had also won contracts from OTB.²¹

Grassroots' level of organization and power to win votes on its home turf appear to have faded somewhat in the years since Brown took office: in 2021, Brown lost his home district, Masten, to India Walton in the general election.²² Powering his win were city workers – a built-in political machine that has often been leveraged by sitting mayors – and a political network rooted in South Buffalo. South Buffalo is a majority white and more conservative part of the city that gave Trump some of his strongest numbers in 2020 – topping 40% in many election districts – and is home to many city workers.²³ In some prior primaries, it had voted for Brown's opponents, but went heavily for Brown thanks in part to the organizing of then-Common Councilmember Chris Scanlon, who is now acting mayor.

Scanlon emerges from the lineage of one of the city's most infamous political machines, the South Buffalo operation led by former longtime mayor Jimmy Griffin, a deeply reactionary force in the city. His father, John "Scanoots" Scanlon, was Griffin's key patronage dispenser (many years later, the city payroll is still full of Scanlons; Scanlon's wife is a city bingo inspector).²⁴ Brown's first mayoral campaign received support from Griffin and Scanoots in 2005, though not from Eve. In 2012, Brown reportedly helped broker the appointment of Chris Scanlon to the Common Council.²⁵

Other Sectors:

There are several other sectors worth mentioning, including church and faith networks, labor unions – which tend to be major political spenders – and other neighborhood and community activist networks. The structures of power within each of these sectors are complex and sometimes very divided, often not achieving the level of alignment demonstrated by the dominant power structure. Within labor, for instance, the police and building trades have more conservative tendencies and often align in service of business and real estate interests, while the teachers union has perennially found itself in the crosshairs of local elites.

While the politicians picking candidates, the operatives organizing factions, and leaders in these other networks play a role in shaping life in Buffalo and enjoy some spoils of influence – including the ego boost that comes with a degree of control – their power is less significant than that of the dominant power structure detailed in the pages that follow.

III: KEY BUSINESS AND REAL ESTATE INTERESTS

This section aims to introduce the key business and real estate interests that sit at the center of Buffalo's dominant power structure. Some indicators of their influence and place in the power structure - the ways in which they govern, benefit, win, and have a reputation for power - are briefly touched upon here. Further examinations of how they organize themselves, their shared agenda, and their mechanisms of influence will follow in subsequent sections.

Some types of businesses play a far more prominent role in the local power structure than others. Businesses that have a shared speculative interest in the city and region - that is, those whose fortunes are particularly tied up, through real estate and other investments and activities, in the region's ability to generate growth and attract capital - tend to be more active and influential. Major employers that are not particularly attached to the region and can more easily move their operations are less likely to get involved.²⁶

This collection of interests, which tends to make up the dominant power structures of US cities, is sometimes called the growth coalition, a coin termed by sociologist Harvey Molotch in a seminal 1976 essay that introduced the conceptual framework of cities as "growth machines" for local elites speculating on growth and the rising real estate values that come with it.²⁷ The growth coalition's interest in the city as a profit engine puts it in fundamental conflict with residents' interest in the city as a place to live.

Buffalo's growth coalition has not been successful relative to other US cities – the city's (and region's) population declined steadily for decades, and has only recently seen modest increases.²⁸ The possible reasons for its failures are discussed at length in Dillaway's study of the local power structure, *Power Failure*. In any case growth, and the rising real estate values that come with it, is a major shared purpose for the local power structure, and the growth coalition is a useful conceptual framework.

Buffalo is not home to many corporate giants. For years, the city was home to no companies on the Fortune 500 list of largest publicly-traded companies, though M&T Bank has made the list in recent years. Additionally, Rich Products and Delaware North are included in the Forbes list of largest privately-held companies.²⁹ Rich Products, along with other business and real estate interests detailed in the pages that follow, are at the heart of the local power structure.

Notably, just 13 publicly-traded corporations are now headquartered in the region, down from 19 in 2022; six companies left the list due to mergers and acquisitions, a bankruptcy, and two headquarters moves.³⁰ Only one of the companies, Evans Bank – which recently merged with NTB Bank – was a significant player in the local power structure, and none of the companies was a top local employer.³¹

BANKS AND OTHER FINANCIAL FIRMS

Through their deposit-taking, lending, and other financial and investment activities, banks and other financial firms play a central role in the local economy and power structure, and have a deep interest in the city and region's real estate market and growth prospects. As in most US cities, they are a key, active anchor of the local growth coalition.

In Buffalo, one bank stands apart as by far the most powerful financial player in the region: M&T Bank, which has a 71% share of Erie County's deposits as of 2024 and is the top commercial and #2 residential lender.³² It is also the region's #2 private sector employer behind Kaleida, with 7,600 employees as of 2022.³³ M&T's dominance of the region's financial sector is a long-developing phenomenon that grew out of waves of corporate consolidation, as well as the work of its former CEO, Robert Wilmers, to turn it into a regional financial juggernaut and make it a center of economic and political power in the region (with many government and nonprofit institutions as customers). Wilmers reached billionaire status not long before his death, in 2017. M&T's current CEO is René Jones.

The integral role of M&T Bank in the local power structure can be seen in its major sponsorship of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership (the leading business advocacy group in the region), presence on many key institutional boards, political giving, and other markers that are discussed in sections to follow. That said, there are few indicators of Jones taking on as much of a local leadership role as Wilmers, who was a dominant presence for decades.

Though they rank far behind M&T, other top banks in the region include KeyBank, Five Star Bank, Evans Bank (in the process of merging with NTB), HSBC, and Northwest Bank, all of which are Buffalo Niagara Partnership sponsors. Nonbank lenders such as Largo Real Estate (the #5 commercial lender in the region³⁴) and Premium Mortgage and Hunt Mortgage (the #1 and #5 residential mortgage lenders, behind M&T Bank) have also emerged as financial players.³⁵

REAL ESTATE DEVELOPERS AND OTHER REAL ESTATE FIRMS

Real estate developers play a prominent and often very publicly visible role in Buffalo's local power structure. They sit at the intersection of – and in some ways represent – a range of interests, all of which have a stake in local real estate speculation. 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 lease their buildings. Though they sometimes enter into conflict with one another, they are largely aligned in maintaining a developer-first approach to local land use policy (heavily subsidized, lightly taxed, and free of housing regulation and public development initiatives that would threaten their profits).

The following table, drawn from Our City's 2024 report "The Rich Don't Pay," shows the top 10 real estate developers in the city, based on an analysis of city property ownership records,^{[36](#)} as well as their tax payments and the amount they would be paying if they pulled a full, non-subsidized tax rate.^{[37](#)}

Table 1: Major Developer Property Ownership and Tax Payments in the City of Buffalo

Owner	No. of properties	Assessed value	Tax payments	Tax rate(per \$1,000 of assessed value)	Additional tax payments if paying full rate (18.72)
Ellicott Development /Paladino	256	\$253,927,634	\$2,991,841	11.78	\$1,762,544
Uniland/Montante	28	\$117,678,352	\$1,511,828	12.85	\$691,509
Benderson Development	63	\$106,536,600	\$1,591,033	14.93	\$403,693
Douglas Development /Jemal	38	\$94,715,700	\$878,160	9.27	\$895,239
Ciminelli Real Estate	35	\$80,228,255	\$1,279,873	15.95	\$222,271
Larkin Development /Zemsky	50	\$66,977,500	\$1,069,175	15.96	\$184,871
Gold Wynn	37	\$66,749,865	\$1,108,442	16.61	\$141,341
Sinatra & Company	50	\$52,873,201	\$718,907	13.6	\$271,058
Signature Development /Termini	24	\$51,378,700	\$593,861	11.56	\$368,122
Savarino Properties	22	\$47,399,800	\$113,823	2.4	\$773,662
Total		\$938,465,607	\$11,856,943	12.63	\$5,714,311

Note: Data for the above table was aggregated from assessment and tax rolls available at data.buffalony.gov. It excludes PILOTs, or payments in lieu of taxes, which developers sometimes negotiate in order to obtain a lower tax rate or to support infrastructure development around their properties.

Many of these developers, such as Ellicott Development/Paladino, Uniland/Montante, and Ciminelli, have long been major local players, but some, such as Douglas Development/Doug Jemal and Gold Wynn Residential/Jeffrey Wynn, are relatively recent arrivals and are not locally-based. The table suggests that ownership and control of property is heavily concentrated in the hands of a small group of developers: the total assessed valuation of \$938 million shown in the table above is approximately 8% of the city's total taxable assessed valuation of \$11.7 billion.³⁸

Nationally, the nature of real estate ownership has shifted in recent years, as financial vehicles such as real estate investment trusts (REITs) have been buying up a great deal of property in US cities and around the world. In Buffalo, some prominent commercial buildings – such as the recently vacated Highmark building and the Niagara Center federal office building – are owned by REITs.³⁹ Additionally, local developers, such as Nick Sinatra, manage real estate investment capital on behalf of private equity investors far outside the region.⁴⁰ The economic and political impacts of this increasing distribution of ownership (and the rents that flow from it) outside the region are worthy of further inquiry.

Though developers are often the most visible real estate players, there are a range of other real estate interests that are active and influential within the local power structure. For instance, residential real estate firms such as Hunt Real Estate – which also has a major residential mortgage lending arm, Hunt Mortgage – often occupy important board seats, are major political contributors, and play an active role in business advocacy vehicles like the Buffalo Niagara Partnership.

LAW FIRMS:

Law firms, similar to real estate developers and banks, sit at the intersection of a variety of relationships. They act as connectors and dealmakers, gossips, enforcers, and policymakers, both officially and unofficially. They often play a major role in local real estate development projects, and form a key link between business and government – servicing both business interests and government agencies and authorities. The many hats they wear and benefits they draw from government contracts, combined with the fact that they are often top political contributors, sometimes raises conflict of interest questions.

As an example, the city of Buffalo's corporation counsel often contracts out legal work to outside law firms, and Hodgson Russ has been one of the top beneficiaries of this spending – raking in nearly \$6 million of the \$11 million the city spent on outside legal fees during the Brown's first 11 years in office.[41](#) Hodgson Russ partners have been major contributors to Brown, and partner Adam Perry is a major donor and close associate of the mayor. Hodgson Russ's lucrative work for Industrial Development Authorities was also the subject of a recent watchdog report.[42](#)

Hodgson Russ and Phillips Lytle rise above the rest in terms of their size, influence, and role in the local power structure, though several others, including Barclay Damon, Lippes Mathias, and Rupp Pfalzgraf, are also top players.

HEALTHCARE AND EDUCATION:

The shift to a service-based economy has meant that healthcare and educational institutions have taken on a greater degree of economic importance in Buffalo, as in other cities. These institutions are major employers, and they are also often nonprofit or government institutions, with boards and oversight bodies composed of local power brokers. They tend to be more firmly tied to the region than some other kinds of employers and industries, which can more easily pick up and move. As a result, they play an important role in the local growth coalition, anchoring local real estate development projects and strategies.

Of these institutions, none plays as central a role in the local power structure as the **University at Buffalo**, SUNY's flagship research university. Its enrollment (25,000), workforce (6,000) and economic footprint far outstrips that of any other university in the region, and it consistently plays a starring role in the local growth coalition's favorite real estate development projects: the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, UB 2020, and the Buffalo Billion are some recent examples. Though a public university, the UB Foundation and a network of associated nonprofits amount to a partial privatization of governance at the university, affording local power brokers a means of exercising control over the university's planning processes and resources.

The president of the University at Buffalo is Satish Tripathi. UB's various boards are some of the most well-connected in the region, and are discussed more in section IV.

Kaleida and Catholic Health, both nonprofits, are the two major local healthcare systems. Kaleida is the largest, with 8,200 employees,⁴³ and its construction projects and close partnership with UB played a central role in development of the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.

Other major healthcare and educational institutions include: Roswell Park and Erie County Medical Center; insurers Independent Health, Highmark, and Univera; and universities such as Canisius, Buffalo State, Daemen, and D'Youville. Most of these organizations – including several public ones, the University at Buffalo, Buffalo State, and Roswell Park – are sponsors of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership.

LOCAL BILLIONAIRES:

Two corporations headquartered in Buffalo are owned by billionaire families and play a major role in the local power structure:

- **Delaware North**, the concessions, gaming, and sports conglomerate, is owned and managed by members of the Jacobs family, including executive chairman Jeremy Jacobs, and co-CEOs (and sons of Jeremy) Jerry Jr, Lou, and Charlie Jacobs. The family is worth \$4.6 billion.⁴⁴
- **Rich Products**, the food products company (and owner of the Buffalo Bisons through Rich Baseball Operations), is owned by Robert Rich, Jr (senior chairman), and his wife, Mindy Rich (chairman). Rich is now worth \$7.1 billion, placing him #140 on Forbes' list of richest Americans.⁴⁵

The companies are major but not top-ranking local employers, each with about 1,200 employees in the region. Both companies are significant power players in Buffalo: they are top political donors, provide high-level sponsorship to the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, and their executives sit on many key institutional boards. This, as well as their involvement in various boondoggles and controversies, is discussed in sections that follow.

Bob Rich and Jeremy Jacobs both inherited control of their companies from their fathers. Of the billionaires, Jacobs looms larger locally than Rich, who makes his primary home in Florida and operates at a far remove from the local scene.⁴⁶

Philanthropic activity is one very visible component of the Jacobs family influence: Jeremy is a major donor to UB (its medical school is named after him and his family) and he has been chair of its highest governing board, the governor-appointed UB Council, since 1998.⁴⁷ But there are other aspects, as well: Governor Kathy Hochul's husband, William Hochul, worked for Delaware North until recently; Jacobs' nephew, Chris, served in Congress; and the Jacobs family occupies many powerful board seats around town.

Rich, meanwhile, relies on top corporate lieutenants to exercise influence locally, including Rich Products executive Jonathan Dandes, who sits on more powerful boards than any other individual covered in this report, as noted in section IV.

MEDIA:

Local media plays an especially important role within the local power structure due to its power to shape public opinion. This is discussed further in section VI.

Of local media outlets, the **Buffalo News** remains a dominant force, helping to shape and drive local coverage. That said, its subscription base has been dwindling, and it now ranks far behind the two top TV news outlets, WGRZ and WIVB, in terms of its reach.⁴⁸ Its new corporate owner, Lee Enterprises, has made significant cuts at the newspaper, including selling off its building, cutting jobs, and even opting to not print the newspaper on major holidays.⁴⁹ Buffalo Business First is also an influential shaper of local business coverage.

These outlets draw advertising dollars from major local business and real estate interests and are often managed by members of the power structure. This was especially the case with former Buffalo News publisher **Stan Lipsey**, a driving force behind the creation of the Group of 18, an elite coordinating council discussed later in section IV. Though current publisher Tom Wiley is relatively new to town, he has joined two significant power structure boards, that of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership and Invest Buffalo Niagara.

Increasingly, major local media outlets are not owned locally, which likely has some effect on their involvement in the power structure. The decline of legacy media and rise of social media has also likely had some effect on these outlets' ability to shape local narratives, but they still play a powerful role.

SPORTS TEAMS:

The city's major sports teams, the Bills and Sabres, play a major role in shaping the local culture and in putting the city on a national stage. They are a core priority of the local power structure, and the teams' financial interests are also closely tied to the trajectory of the city and region. Both teams are now owned by Florida billionaires **Terry and Kim Pegula**. The Pegulas owe their \$7.7 billion fortune to fracking.⁵⁰ In addition to their ownership of the Bills and Sabres, the Pegulas also own a 64% stake in Rand Capital Corp, an investment firm that is one of the region's 19 publicly-held corporations.⁵¹ The Bills and Sabres are top-level sponsors of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership.

Despite his enormous personal wealth, Pegula sought and obtained over \$1 billion in subsidies for the new Bills stadium, threatening to move the team if it did not receive the subsidies.⁵²

UTILITIES:

Utility companies are major players within the local power structure: gas utility **National Fuel**, electric utility **National Grid**, and telecom utility **Charter Communications**. They are heavily regulated at the state level, negotiate franchise agreements at the local level, and are also top taxpayers in the city of Buffalo. The growth of their businesses is also heavily dependent on the overall population growth of the city and region. As a result the companies – and especially National Fuel – end up playing a central role in the local power structure, as sponsors of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, major political donors, and through other civic activities.

OTHER KEY PLAYERS:

Other industries and corporate players worth noting include:

- **Moog**, the defense contractor headquartered in Elma, has 4,200 employees and is a top-level sponsor of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership and major presence on local power boards.
- **Tops Markets**, the supermarket chain, has 5,000 employees, is a high-level sponsor of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, and has a significant presence in the local power structure.
- The **tech sector and startups** have been a major focus of the local power structure as it endeavors to attract new kinds of capital to the region. In recent years, the tech incubator **43North**, led by founding board chair Jordan Levy, has played a key role in these efforts, awarding startup funding through an annual competition funded in large part by New York State. The program had some notable early failures, including investing in companies that left the region shortly after receiving the prize money.⁵³
- Its most significant success story is **ACV Auctions**, which went public in 2021 and is now worth \$3 billion, though it has yet to turn a profit.⁵⁴ The company has created several hundred jobs locally, and accounts for a large share of the local jobs created by 43North companies. Another tech company making headlines is Belgian-owned Odoo, which recently purchased seven floors in 40 Fountain Plaza from New York State for \$1 in return for creating 350 jobs over the next five years (the state's previous plan for the building, an IBM technology hub, failed).⁵⁵

These businesses and their leading executives and owners are compiled in a table in the appendix.

IV: ORGANIZATION OF BUFFALO'S POWER STRUCTURE: KEY INSTITUTIONS AND COZY NETWORKS

"Things were kind of incestuous," remarked U.S. District Court Judge Valerie E. Caproni, who is presiding over the federal trial.

"It's not a small city; it's a big room," [former LPCiminelli Executive] Schuler responded.⁵⁶ - Buffalo News coverage of the Buffalo Billion trial

While each of the above entities have their own specific business interests and activities, their owners and executives come together at a number of institutional gathering points to socialize with one another, align around core priorities and strategies, and govern key institutions - which also sometimes drive lucrative real estate development projects and dole out subsidies, contracts, and leases.

These institutional gathering points are generally the same for any US city: business advocacy and policy-planning groups; foundations; civic and charitable groups; cultural organizations such as museums and theaters; healthcare nonprofits; schools and universities; social clubs; and public authorities and other government boards.

By mapping the boards, executives, and membership lists of key institutions in Buffalo, we can get a sense of just how tightly interconnected and cohesive the Buffalo power structure is.

The following section includes a network analysis of these institutions, and identifies key institutions and individuals at the center of the network. It then offers background on the city's history of elite coordinating circles and profiles two organizations that surface in the data as particularly central to the local power structure: the Buffalo Club and the Buffalo Niagara Partnership.

NETWORK ANALYSIS: ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS AT THE CENTER OF BUFFALO'S POWER STRUCTURE

This section seeks to answer the following questions: Who oversees major local institutions? Who knows who? Which businesses are most involved in local affairs? Where do local elites mix and mingle?

The network analysis summarized below was conducted by compiling and analyzing board membership lists for over 100 prominent organizations, as well as partial membership lists for the Buffalo Club and 43x79.⁵⁷ Organizations and businesses were included on the basis of size, revenue, and reputation for influence.⁵⁸ The data set was further augmented with data from Buffalo Business First's Power 250 list, and drawing on information from LittleSis.org.⁵⁹ It is not a comprehensive list, but it includes a representative sample from various sectors:

- **Business and real estate advocacy groups.** Organizations included the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, the region's most prominent business advocacy organization, business leadership groups like the Buffalo Renaissance Foundation and 43x79, as well as an array of other groups including Invest Buffalo Niagara, 43North (startup accelerator), Buffalo Place (downtown business district management), Buffalo Civic Auto Ramps (parking), the Richardson Center Corporation, and the Central Terminal Restoration corporation.

- **Social clubs.** Social clubs are an important gathering point for the local elite. Though membership lists are not publicly available, the boards of directors for prominent local social clubs such as the Buffalo Club and Saturn Club were included, and a partial membership list was obtained for the Buffalo Club.
- **Universities and schools.** The boards of major universities in the region were included, including the University at Buffalo, Canisius, D'Youville, Buffalo State, Daemen, and Niagara University. The data set also included the boards of two private schools, Nichols and Nardin Academy.
- **Healthcare.** The boards of the region's three major healthcare systems/hospitals – Kaleida, Catholic Health, and ECMC – were included, as well as those of other major healthcare organizations, such as Roswell Park and Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.60
- **Cultural.** This is a broad category, with analysis including museums such as the Buffalo AKG, Burchfield Penney, and Explore and More, and cultural organizations and venues such as Shea's, the Buffalo Philharmonic, the Buffalo Zoo, Martin House, and Visit Buffalo Niagara.
- **Charitable and philanthropic.** The analysis covered the boards of a cross-section of especially prominent charities, such as Say Yes, the YMCA, Feedmore, and the United Way, and major foundations such as the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo and the Oishei Foundation.

- **Public authorities.** Local public authority boards tend to include many prominent political donors and members of the real estate and business community. The analysis included the boards of Buffalo Urban Development Corporation, Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation, Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority, and the Erie County Fiscal Stability Authority.
- **Corporate.** The boards of publicly-traded for-profit corporations, such as M&T Bank, National Fuel, Moog, Evans Bancorp, and ACV Auctions, were included.

While this is not an exhaustive list, by any means, it is still large enough to surface patterns and shed light on the local power structure. It helps us answer the below kinds of questions:

- **Key organizations.** Which organizations are especially well-connected and central within the network by virtue of shared board memberships, or interlocks, with other organizations?
- **Key individuals.** Which individuals sit on the most prominent boards, and are therefore especially well-connected within Buffalo's power structure?
- **Key businesses/employers.** Which businesses have executives sitting on the most boards, and are especially active in Buffalo's power structure?

HIGHLY-CONNECTED ORGANIZATIONS:

Which organizations are at the center of the power structure? Some organizations emerged in the data as being especially central and well-connected within the overall network.

The following table shows the list of the most highly-connected organizations. To rank the organizations' connectedness, the analysis used a combination of two factors: a score generated by a network analysis algorithm and a measure of the average connectedness of people associated with the organization.⁶¹

TABLE 2: HIGHLY-CONNECTED ORGANIZATIONS IN BUFFALO'S POWER STRUCTURE

Rank	Organization	Description
1	Buffalo Club*	Social club
2	Buffalo Niagara Partnership	Business advocacy
3	UB Council	Public university governing board
4	Jacobs Institute	Healthcare nonprofit
5	43x79*	Elite coordinating circle
6	Invest Buffalo Niagara	Business advocacy
7	Say Yes Buffalo	Education charity
8	Visit Buffalo Niagara	Tourism bureau
9	Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus	Healthcare real estate nonprofit
10	Buffalo Urban Development Corporation	Government agency
11	University at Buffalo Foundation	Private foundation at public university
12	Buffalo Renaissance Foundation	Charity
13	Kaleida Health	Healthcare provider
14	Roswell Park Alliance Foundation	Private foundation at public healthcare provider
15	UB School of Management Dean's Advisory Council	Public university advisory council

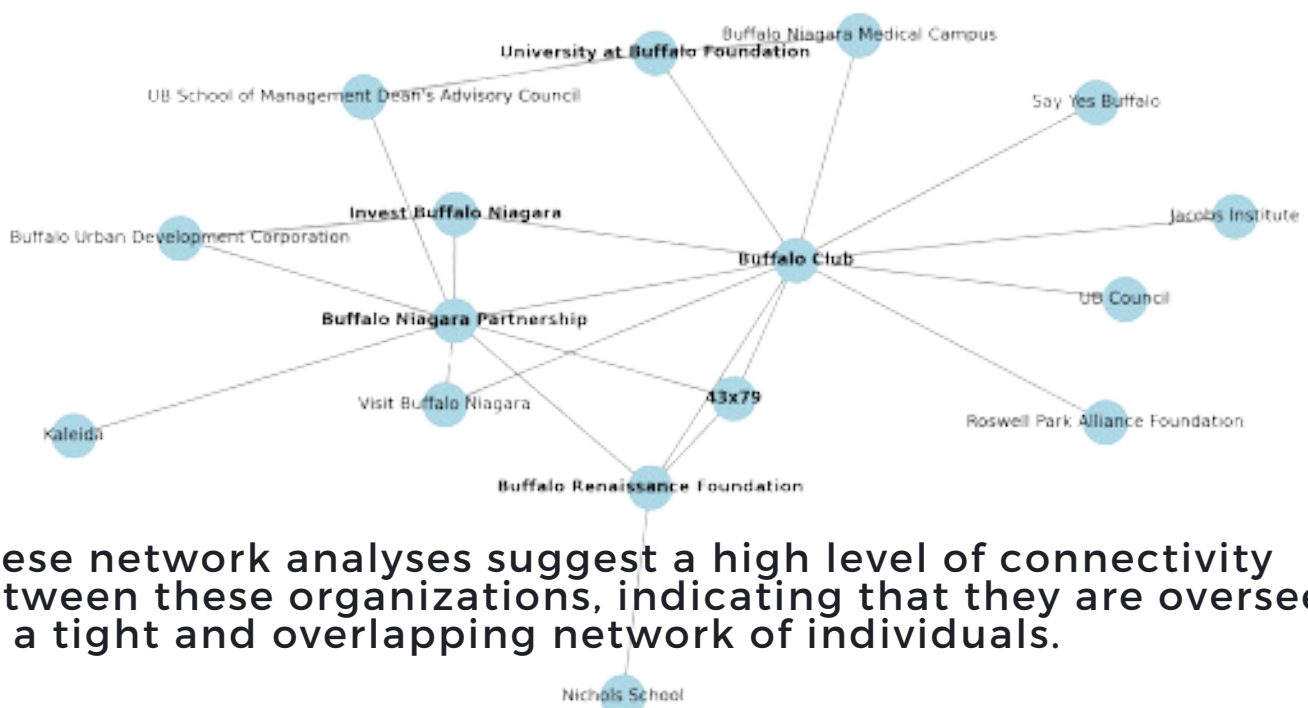
* Partial membership lists were included for 43x79 and the Buffalo Club, and board lists for the other organizations on the list.

The top two institutions that emerged in the analysis, the Buffalo Club and the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, are discussed at greater length below.

The University at Buffalo looms large on the list: its top governing board, the UB Council, sits at #3, and two other boards, including its private foundation and its business school's advisory council, also appear. The local power structure attaches critical importance to UB, since it is a major economic engine and also a key driver of real estate development projects (such as the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus).

Many of these organizations have a great deal of overlap with one another. The following network graph shows relationships between organizations in the data set that have four or more individuals in common, or interlocks, through shared board members (or members, in the case of the Buffalo Club and 43x79):

INTERLOCKS GRAPH: ORGANIZATIONS SHARING FOUR OR MORE BOARD MEMBERS/MEMBERS



These network analyses suggest a high level of connectivity between these organizations, indicating that they are overseen by a tight and overlapping network of individuals.

HIGHLY-CONNECTED INDIVIDUALS

Which people are at the center of the power structure? The data gives us a sense of which individuals are especially well-connected.

The following table shows a list of highly-connected individuals who have five or more board seats or memberships. The full list of 50 highly-connected individuals – those with four or more ties – is included in the appendix and includes many of the top executives in the region. It is a kind of roster of leading local power players.

TABLE 3: HIGHLY-CONNECTED INDIVIDUALS (FIVE OR MORE BOARD SEATS OR MEMBERSHIPS)

Person	Employer/major affiliation	# Boards/ Memberships
Jonathan Dandes	Rich Products	12
Dottie Gallagher	Buffalo Niagara Partnership	9
Thomas Kucharski	Invest Buffalo Niagara	7
Satish Tripathi	University at Buffalo	7
Thomas Beauford	Buffalo Urban League	6
Steven Finch	AAA; National Fuel director	6
John Scannell	Moog (board member, former CEO)	6
Douglas Bean	Mower	6
Byron Brown	City of Buffalo	6
Anthony Spada	AAA Western and Central New York	6
William Gisell	Rich Products	5
Scott Bieler	West Herr Auto Group	5
Peter Hunt	Hunt Real Estate	5
Michael Montante	Uniland Development	5
Kimberley Minkel	Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority	5
Jeremy Jacobs	Delaware North	5
Allison Brashear	University at Buffalo	5

The table includes representation from many major local businesses and developers, as well as several public officials and heads of charities and advocacy groups. Some of these officials, such as Mayor Byron Brown, serve in ex officio roles, meaning that their board seats belong to their offices (as mayor, for instance), which is somewhat different than if they had been secured as a result of power relationships and wealth.

Several individuals stand out as sitting on a particularly large number of power boards, including Rich Products executive Jonathan Dandes and Buffalo Niagara Partnership head Dottie Gallagher.

Some background on Jonathan Dandes, the most well-connected individual on the list – but not exactly a household name – is in order. Dandes sits on the following boards covered in the analysis: 100 Club of Buffalo, Artpark, Buffalo Niagara Partnership, Buffalo Niagara Partnership Foundation, Buffalo Zoo, Buffalo Zoo Foundation, Erie County Medical Center, Explore and More Children's Museum, Shea's Performing Arts Center, UB Council, and Visit Buffalo Niagara. He is a member of the Buffalo Club.

Dandes first got to know the billionaire Rich family as a college student, when he was president of the UB Student Association and Robert Rich Sr chaired the UB Council.⁶² This was in 1973, during a period when UB was grappling with major changes, including those related to its move to Amherst; Dandes was a controversial student leader who apparently chose to cozy up to the university's power structure.⁶³ He eventually went to work for Rich Products in 1986. Though he has held other roles at Rich Products, he now serves as Corporate Vice President of Governmental Relations and Special Projects and head of Rich Baseball Operations (the Bisons). In 2023, he elaborated on his relationship with the Rich family in the Buffalo News: "I can't

say enough about what Bob and Mindy have meant both personally and from a career perspective.”64

Dandes developed a deeper connection to UB after joining Rich Products: he was appointed to the UB Council in 1994, the university’s highest governing board, and is now the longest-serving member of the governor-appointed board. Though the association with the Riches and Rich Products is key to his power, he has developed influence in his own right as a board member of so many powerful local institutions, some of which are government entities or have government leases and contracts. City hall officials are particularly responsive to his phone calls, according to one source interviewed for this report.65 That Dandes wields so much power in city hall points to the power of suburbanites in influencing city affairs: he lives in East Amherst.66

Board seats are only one measure of a person’s relationships: there are also friendships, familial relationships, and business relationships, for instance. Board seats are just the easiest to map, because the data is publicly-available, and provide a useful approximation of how connected someone is. But leaning on them too heavily might somewhat exaggerate the power of local elites who are keen to spend a lot of time in board meetings, like Dandes; that is to say, they give us a useful picture but not the entire picture of the power structure.

HIGHLY-CONNECTED EMPLOYERS

Which employers are represented on the most boards?

Employer affiliations – where people serve as executives – were identified for most of the individuals on the list sitting on three or more boards, and for close to half the individuals in the data set, offering a strong picture of which businesses maintain the highest profile in the local power structure.

Table 4: Highly-connected employers

Primary Employer	# Power Boards / Memberships
M&T Bank	34
Rich Products	26
Hodgson Russ	24
Delaware North	18
Independent Health	15
Phillips Lytle	14
Moog	14
University at Buffalo	13
Roswell Park	13
Kaleida Health	12
City of Buffalo	12
National Fuel	11
KeyBank	11
Hunt Real Estate	11
Uniland	10

This table identifies which businesses and other employers have executives sitting on the largest number of boards. In cases where multiple executives sat on the same board, the organization was only counted once. At this point, the list should be somewhat predictable.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND POLITICAL COMPOSITION OF THE POWER STRUCTURE:

What neighborhoods do local power players live in? What is their age and gender breakdown? What are their political party affiliations?

It is possible to surface answers to these questions by cross-referencing the power board

member list with voter file data, which includes some key demographic data (age, gender, residential zip code). An automated matching process found strong matches for roughly half of the individuals in the larger data set. This data was then narrowed down to individuals who are somewhat more likely to be significant players in the local power structure: those with two or more ties to the organizations on the list. There were 183 individuals on this list of power board members. The following are some observations from the data:

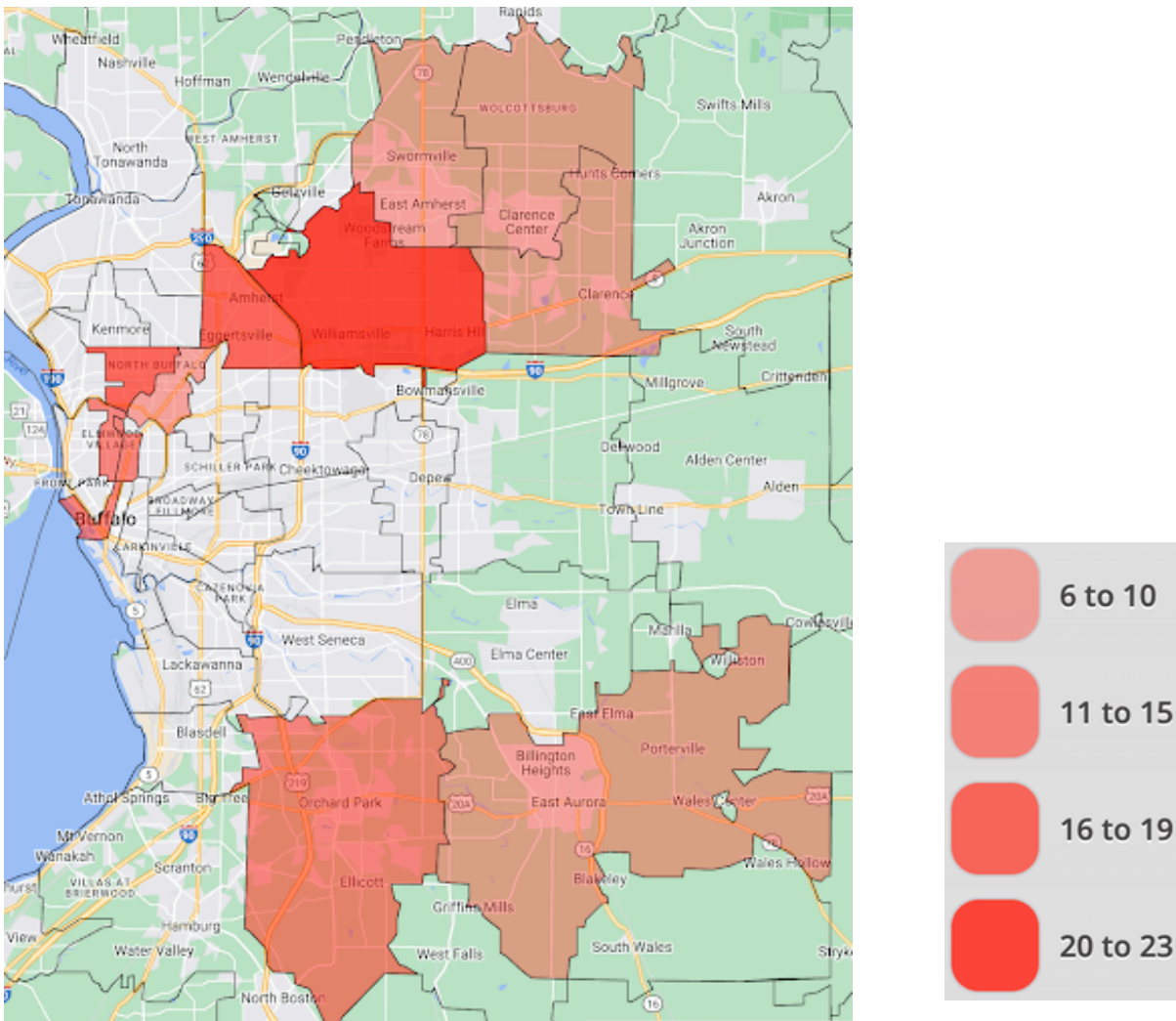
- Men are a significant majority: 61% (111) are men, 39% (72) are women.
- The overall party registration mix is similar to Erie County's. 45% are registered Democrats, 34% are registered Republicans or Conservatives, and 21% have a blank or other affiliation. Erie County's percentages are 45% Democratic, 28% Republican/Conservative, and 27% blank or other.
- The men lean Republican/Conservative, but a strong majority of the women are registered Democrats. Of the men, 39% are registered Republicans/Conservatives compared with 35% Democrats. 60% of the women are registered Democrats compared with 26% Republican/Conservative.
- They tend to be older. The median age of the list is 63, and just 16% of the group is under the age of 50. This is significantly older than the Erie County electorate: the median age of registered voters in Erie County is 53, and 45% of registered voters are under the age of 50.
- The majority live in the suburbs, but with a gender divide. Of the overall list, 56% live in the suburbs, and 44% live in the city. An even larger majority of the men on the list (64%) live in the suburbs, compared with 36% in the city, whereas 51% of women live in the city and 49% in the suburbs.

They live in the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city and suburbs. 14221 (Williamsville) is home to the most individuals on the list, followed by 14226 (Snyder), and 14216 (Buffalo, includes wealthy neighborhoods around Delaware Park).

The below map shows zip codes that are home to six or more individuals on the list.⁶⁷ The map highlights the most affluent parts of the city and wealthy suburbs such as Williamsville,

Clarence, Orchard Park, and East Aurora. In other words, the people who are governing key local institutions also appear to be quite wealthy, and live in many of the same neighborhoods.

Map: Where does the local power structure live?



Note: the map legend shows the number of individuals in the data set for each level of shading. Zip codes such as 14221, where more individuals on the list live, are more darkly shaded. Only zip codes with six or more individuals are shown, since there was a significant dropoff after six; roughly twenty other zip codes are home to 1-3 individuals on the list.

ELITE COORDINATING CIRCLES: THE GROUP OF 18, 43X79, AND BEYOND

Several notable elite coordinating tables have popped up in Buffalo over the years. These essentially function as strategy tables where top power players get organized and aligned and formulate strategies for advancing their agenda within the region. One of these tables, 43x79 (the name is a reference to Buffalo's latitude and longitude) ranks high in the above list of highly-connected organizations, due to the relationships of its known members.

Historically, elite coordinating circles have played somewhat of a complex role in the region. They have at times been a key means through which the local power structure gets organized and strategizes to achieve its goals. However, rather than all-powerful coordinating bodies where all important decisions get made, the reality is that these groups appear to have varying levels of influence. They have at times sparked conflict and division within the local elite, and go through long periods of decline and inactivity. Regardless, they have occupied an important and sometimes dominant role in the organization and maintenance of the local power structure.

The most prominent such circle was the Group of 18, 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. Many members of the group were new arrivals in Buffalo, and saw a vacuum of political and business leadership in the region in the context of economic decline.⁶⁸ Wilmers never made Buffalo his home base – he spent Monday to Wednesday in Buffalo, lived in New York City, and vacationed in western Massachusetts and France – but loomed large as the city's top corporate power broker for years.⁶⁹

The group also included representation from several of the region's wealthiest families, including Jeremy Jacobs, Robert Rich, Jr, and Seymour and Northrup Knox. Of their membership, 15 of the 18 were drawn from the service sector and three from manufacturing, reflecting the shifts that had already taken place in the local economy. One public sector official, the president of the University at Buffalo, was included as well. The group was composed entirely of white men.

The Group of 18 came together out of "business-related self-interest," in the words of one member, to coordinate and press its priorities for the region.⁷⁰ It drove the merger of the area's key business advocacy organizations to form the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, installed chosen recruits to head government agencies,⁷¹ and angled to secure government support and subsidies for its favored economic development projects (with key members of the group and their friends, of course, often being key beneficiaries of these deals).⁷² It was the voice of big business in the region, using its collective clout to push for its agenda. The Buffalo News, led by Lipsey, was a key tool in its arsenal.

The Group of 18 was not well-loved; it was widely seen as a big business cabal. In a 2001 Buffalo News leadership survey, the Group of 18 scored lower than any other business group in town.⁷³

The 43x79 Group, a successor to the Group of 18, came together in the late 1990s. Its first meeting was called by Lipsey, the co-organizer of the Group of 18, and was held at the Buffalo Club, according to the Buffalo News.⁷⁴ Developer Lou Ciminelli, then the chair of the group, told the Buffalo News at the time that Lipsey organized the group in order to

pass the torch to the next generation: "It's time some of you young fellows take the reins here and get something happening in Western New York...I think that's what Stan was saying, that we'll be the future Group of 18."

Original members of the 43x79, who were also entirely white men, included:

- Lou Ciminelli (chair), former CEO of LPCiminelli, who was convicted of wire fraud in 2018 as part of the Buffalo Billion corruption probe. The US Supreme Court recently reversed the conviction.^{[75](#)}
- Jordan Levy and Ronald Schreiber, then known as successful tech entrepreneurs. Levy is now the chair emeritus of 43North, the startup accelerator.
- Paul Ciminelli, brother of Lou and CEO of Ciminelli Real Estate.
- Brian Lipke, then CEO of Gibraltar Steel, who was also a member of the Group of 18.
- Jeremy Jacobs Jr, son of Jeremy Jacobs, now co-CEO of Delaware North.
- Chris Jacobs, cousin of Jeremy Jacobs, who was eventually elected to Congress and elected not to seek reelection in 2022.
- Howard Zemsky, now of Larkin Development.

43x79 has not achieved the notoriety of the Group of 18 and it does not appear to be especially active (in fact, it is unclear if it's still active at all), though groups like this do not always broadcast their existence. Its political action committee remains registered in New York State, and it periodically funnels contributions from members of the group to political candidates. In 2021, for instance, it was a top donor to Mayor Byron Brown's write-in campaign against India Walton, contributing \$13,100.^{[76](#)}

Elite coordinating circles seem to pop up every generation or so. There is no obvious successor to 43x79 emerging, but one group that may have such ambitions is the Downtown Roundtable, now called Downtown 2030, a group advocating for downtown development led by yet another Ciminelli, Kyle (son of Paul, nephew of Lou, and president of Ciminelli Real Estate).⁷⁷

THE BUFFALO CLUB:

There are a number of institutions that play a significant role in the formation of the local elite's shared social identity and worldview, including private schools, social clubs, and faith communities. Though a comprehensive study of these networks is beyond the scope of this report, it is worth offering additional information on the Buffalo Club, which emerged as a central organization in the data analyzed above and stands out as a particularly significant social institution for the local power structure.

The Buffalo Club's membership list has long been a who's who of the local elite, and it remains so today: a January 2024 Instagram post by the Buffalo Club congratulated nearly 100 members of the Buffalo Club on their inclusion in Buffalo Business First's Power 250 ranking.⁷⁸ There are roughly 1,000 members of the club, meaning that around 10% of the club's membership is influential enough to be included in Buffalo Business First's list.⁷⁹ The following are some notable members in industries that play a particularly significant role in the local growth coalition, as discussed above:

- **Real estate developers:** William Paladino (Ellicott Development), Carl and Michael Montante (Uniland), Nick Sinatra (Sinatra & Co), Howard Zemsky (Larkin Development), Paul Ciminelli and Kyle Ciminelli (Ciminelli Real Estate), Frank Ciminelli (Arc Building Partners)

- **Bank CEOs and executives:** René Jones, Patricia Farrell, and Michael Wisler (M&T Bank), David Nasca (Evans Bank), Gregory Duval (HSBC), Kevin Quinn (Five Star Bank)
- **Local billionaire corporations and their executives:** Jeremy, Lou, and Jerry Jacobs (Delaware North), Jonathan Dandes and William Gisel (Rich Products)
- **Healthcare CEOs:** Don Boyd (Kaleida), Joyce Markiewicz (Catholic Health), Candace Johnson (Roswell Park), Michael Edbauer (Highmark), Thomas Quatroche (Erie County Medical Center)
- **Law firm managing partners:** Benjamin Zuffranieri (Hodgson Russ) and Douglas Dimitroff (Phillips Lytle), Kevin Cross (Lippes Mathias), David Pfalzgraf (Rupp Pfalzgraf)
- **College presidents:** Satish Tripathi (University at Buffalo), Steve Stoute (Canisius), Lorrie Clemo (D'Youville)
- **Business advocacy group leaders:** Dottie Gallagher (Buffalo Niagara Partnership), Thomas Kucharski (Invest Buffalo Niagara), Colleen Heidinger (43North)
- **Nonprofit and philanthropic leaders:** Betsy Constantine (Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo), Christina Orsi (Oishei Foundation), Janne Sirén (Buffalo AKG), David Rust (Say Yes)

Buffalo Club membership almost appears to be a requirement for leading local power brokers. Many major local institutions pick up the dues for their executives, including Satish Tripathi, whose dues are paid by the UB Foundation, and Dottie Gallagher, whose dues are paid by the Buffalo Niagara Partnership.⁸⁰

Those membership dues are significant, and help to create the exclusive environment necessary for an elite social club. To join the club, 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.⁸¹ 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.⁸² Semi-formal and business casual attire is required throughout most of the facility.

This exclusivity used to entail outright gender and racial discrimination. The club only began admitting women and Black people as full members in 1989, after passage of a local anti-discrimination law and a series of court decisions.⁸³ The club's 125th anniversary book, published in 1992, speaks glowingly of the club's treatment of women prior to this change: "arrangements accommodating the ladies, and providing them with their own entrance, created a happy environment over the years, with few if any complaints by widows, wives of members and their guests of any gender."⁸⁴ Just prior to the court decisions, club members had voted against admitting women as members by a margin of 403 to 71.

In addition to giving local elites a key venue for networking and creating a sense of social togetherness and shared group identity, important business – and politics – gets done at the Buffalo Club. Many meetings and events are hosted there, though only some get reported on publicly.⁸⁵ Some observers of the local power structure have made frequent references to the club as an important venue for decision-making.

Regarding a proposed 2013 subsidy for Uniland's Delaware North headquarters building, for instance, former Buffalo News columnist Donn Esmonde wrote: "With all due respect, the proposal has the musty, old-school odor of a deal hatched in the Buffalo Club, nurtured in a corporate law office and presented as a veiled ultimatum to overly pliable public officials."⁸⁶

Though many US cities have similar gathering spots for the elite, the Buffalo Club appears to play an especially dominant role in elite networks locally. In other words, if a group was seeking to protest the local power structure, the Buffalo Club is an obvious place to start.

THE BUFFALO NIAGARA PARTNERSHIP

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. Like the Buffalo Club, it stands apart as an especially central institution within the power structure – as indicated by the network analysis, above, and also by its reputation for influence locally.

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 on the local power structure's priorities for the region, which are detailed more in the next section.

The Partnership grew out of the 1993 merger of the Greater Buffalo Development Foundation (GBDF) and the Greater Buffalo Chamber of Commerce. The combination was pushed by the Group of 18 and initially faced opposition by chamber members, as it was seen as a power grab by the big businesses that controlled the GBDF that would limit the influence of small business (more than 70% of the Chamber's members were small businesses).⁸⁷ The merger eventually went through and Andrew Rudnick, a friend that M&T Bank CEO Robert Wilmers had recruited from Houston to head the GBDF, was installed as president. Over the course of Rudnick's

tenure, he and Wilmers, as well as Buffalo News publisher Stan Lipsey, were seen as the leadership trio running the local business community.88

Rudnick retired in 201389 and was replaced at the helm of the Partnership by Dottie Gallagher, a former Buffalo News and Visit Buffalo Niagara executive.90 Though the Partnership is still considered the most powerful business advocacy group in the region, there are signs that its power has been waning in recent years, and there has been no obvious leadership cohort succeeding Wilmers, Rudnick, and Lipsey.

For one, the Partnership's membership has shrunk considerably. At the time of the GBDF-Chamber merger, the Chamber alone had 5,000 members.91 By the 2000s, the Partnership's website said that it had over 3,000 members;92 it now claims "hundreds of members" on its website.93 Though its membership directory currently includes around 1000 firms, many are part of the same corporate families: 83 are KeyBank branches, 72 are M&T Bank branches, 27 are Bank of America branches, 16 are Hunt Real Estate entities, and seven are University at Buffalo entities.94

The Partnership's revenue has also decreased substantially in recent years. Adjusting for inflation, its \$2.8 million in revenue in 2023 is 40% lower than its \$3.5 million in revenue in 2009 (which would amount to about \$4.9 million in 2023 dollars).95 Though it can be difficult to sort out who wields power in an organization with hundreds of members and a board of directors that numbers close to 70, the Partnership's major investor circles offer a sense of which members exert a high level of control over its agenda. 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):96

- 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 list includes representation from many of the key industries in Buffalo's dominant power structure, as outlined in section III. Notably, all three billionaire corporations - Delaware North, Rich Products, and Pegula/Bills/Sabres - are represented in the top two tiers. The rest of the list is composed entirely of big banks, major utilities, healthcare and health insurance companies, as well as Tops and the University at Buffalo. Real estate firms and developers sponsor the Partnership at a somewhat lower level, though they still play a role there: Douglas Development, Uniland, Hunt Real Estate, and First Amherst Development are all sponsors. Others, such as Ciminelli Real Estate and Larkin Development, appear to have dropped out in recent years.97

The Partnership's chair is Thomas Emmerling, managing partner at the accounting firm Dopkins & Company, a member of the Buffalo Club, and a trustee of the Buffalo Philharmonic Foundation. Jonathan Dandes of Rich Products, Donna DeCarolis of National Fuel, and Gregory Duval of HSBC are vice chairs, and Kimberley Minkel of the NFTA is treasurer.98 The board was previously chaired by John Scannell, former CEO of Moog (now a Moog board member).

V: WHAT ARE THEIR INTERESTS AND PRIORITIES? WHAT IS THEIR STORY OF BUFFALO?

"The worst enemy of development in any community is an increase in taxes, and this is a good step in the right direction," said David P. Rutecki, an administrative vice president at M&T Bank and former Council member...

"It is creating a culture for investment that makes this city far more competitive than it might be under other circumstances," [Buffalo Niagara Partnership President Andrew Rudnick] said.[99](#)

- The Buffalo News reporting on praise of Mayor Byron Brown's proposed tax freeze, 2010

"Buffalo finally is being recognized for what it is: a big city with the ambience of a small town and an economy that's staging a slow but steady comeback. Business consultants who moved companies out of Buffalo a decade ago now are recommending the city as a corporate location. The Economist, Business Week, Forbes and The Wall Street Journal all have done stories on the city's renaissance.[100](#)"

- The Buffalo News reporting on the city's "renaissance" in 1988

Now that we have identified some of the key institutions and individuals at the heart of the power structure, we can turn to what it is they want: What is their agenda for the city and region? What are their interests and priorities (and which issues are not priorities for them)? What is their story of Buffalo?

There is a wealth of public information we can draw on to understand these things. The interests, priorities, and views of local power players are conveyed regularly in the media, in the agendas of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, and in the words and deeds of the public officials they support. While varying perspectives and opinions can be found, there is a remarkable degree of alignment on some core priorities and views.

These priorities and views are elaborated on below, but can be briefly summarized as follows: a costly tax and regulatory burden and bloated public sector have been inhibiting growth and economic development in the city and region. Federal, local, and state policymakers need to support growth by cutting taxes, reducing regulation, privatizing services, and providing major subsidies to the private sector.

The growth coalition actively cultivates the sense that any marginal, supposedly “anti-business” decision by local or state authorities will fuel further capital flight, playing on the local community’s historical memory of the devastation associated with deindustrialization. In other words, if you don’t do what we want you to do, no one will invest here, and we will leave.

These are obviously self-serving positions for business and real estate interests – though ostensibly anti-government, they advance a vision of government that serves them, above all – but they justify them through the handy deception of what is sometimes called trickle-down economics: the idea that policies that support business and real estate will produce benefits that will trickle down to the rest of the population. In this framework, programs and policies that directly address some of the major problems the city’s residents face, such as high rates of poverty and a lack of affordable housing, sometimes get lip service but more typically are deprioritized and even maligned.

One of the rising power brokers identified above, Kyle Ciminelli of Ciminelli Real Estate and Downtown 2030, conveyed this perspective succinctly in a recent interview with Buffalo Rising, arguing that “the trickle down effect is more than anything any government handout can do.”^{[101](#)}

Ciminelli was specifically advocating public investment in downtown development, rather than on the East Side; he apparently does not apply the same pejorative label, “government handout,” to the subsidies given to downtown developers.

The power structure’s priorities and vision for the city have remained relatively consistent for decades, but its narrative of Buffalo goes through a regular boom-and-bust cycle, alternating between modes of doom/gloom and renaissance

:

- The “doom and gloom” mode is characterized by visions of economic decline and peril, and warnings that drastic measures must be taken to reverse course. This can be seen, for instance, in the tone M&T Bank CEO Robert Wilmers set for years – in this Buffalo News headline from 2005, for example: “Wilmers Blasts Area Politicians: Tax Burden Blamed for Loss of Jobs, People.”[102](#)
- The “renaissance” mode is characterized by talk of increased economic activity and warnings that business and real estate interests must be prioritized if this “growth” is to continue. An example of this can be seen in Buffalo Niagara Partnership CEO Dottie Gallagher’s 2018 warning against ending the government subsidy programs that led to a supposed “downtown renaissance.”[103](#) Though recent talk of renaissance is fresh in our minds, it is worth noting that other periods of heightened talk of a “renaissance” have happened before – for instance during the 1980s, when the article quoted at the start of this section was published.

In both scenarios, the conclusion is clear: business and real estate interests must be prioritized. These narratives are detached from underlying economic realities for the vast majority of residents, which have remained largely consistent – including high rates of poverty and lagging job growth¹⁰⁴ – during all the phases of the narrative cycle. The evidence for renaissance is often quite thin, and rooted in the real estate sector: some big-ticket, heavily-subsidized projects; a bit of froth in the market; a new business or developer in town.¹⁰⁵ That, plus enough conversations over cocktails at the Buffalo Club, and there you have it: renaissance.

While Byron Brown has not set a particularly inspiring leadership example for the vast majority of Buffalo residents, he has been a careful steward of the vision and priorities outlined above. He has also been fortunate enough to lead the city during a “renaissance” phase – and may be leaving just in time. The city’s severe budget gap and growing crisis in commercial real estate¹⁰⁶ suggest that we may be re-entering a doom and gloom period.

TAXES, REGULATION, AND THE OVERALL BUSINESS CLIMATE

For decades, the local power structure has blamed taxes and regulation for the region’s poor economic performance. Most recently, a 2024 survey of CEOs in Western New York cited taxes and government regulation as the top two challenges facing their businesses.¹⁰⁷ And the Buffalo Niagara Partnership introduces its 2024 advocacy agenda with the words “Our economic climate has a deserved reputation as being one of the most highly taxed and overly regulated in the country...”

This message is amplified ad nauseam in the local media and is essentially the “common sense” explanation for what’s

wrong with the local economy. While local and state taxes and regulation have some impact on perceptions of the business climate, other factors – including geographic resource factors, labor markets, federal policies, and global economic shifts – have likely played a far greater role in shaping current economic conditions.108

The anti-tax and anti-regulatory positions of the power structure translate directly into public policy. Mayor Byron Brown, for instance, has perennially boasted about his efforts to keep tax rates low in the city of Buffalo, and has raised taxes just twice before. The Buffalo Niagara Partnership has left clear fingerprints on this program over the years.109 This has been a significant factor in driving the city into its current budget crisis, and in putting money in the pockets of wealthy property owners, though there is no evidence that it has translated into economic growth or shared prosperity.

WHO BENEFITS? THE RICH ARE GETTING RICHER IN ERIE COUNTY

Despite the frequency with which wealthy, powerful people complain about taxes and regulation and the costs local and state policies are imposing on their businesses, they are doing quite well for themselves.

In 2021, 1,353 Erie County personal income tax filers reported household income totaling \$1,000,000 or more, according to New York State tax data.[110](#) This was a 40% increase from 2020, bigger than that found in New York City or in New York State as a whole. It also represented an 85% increase since 2015 – a rate which far outpaces the average statewide increase of 51% over the same period.

The number of Erie County personal income tax filers with household income of \$500,000 or more also went up dramatically during this period – increasing by 70% from 2015 to 2021, more than the statewide, New York City, or New York State increases.

There are now 4,042 filers in Erie County reporting household income of \$500,000 or more. This translates into about 1% of the county's 444,331 filers in 2021.

We can get a sense of who some of these individuals are from various news sources:

- Three billionaires with major local presences have seen their net worths skyrocket in recent years, according to Forbes data: Robert Rich's \$7.2 billion fortune is up 260% since 2010; Jeremy Jacobs' \$4.6 billion fortune is up 120%

since 2010; and Terry Pegula's \$6.8 billion fortune is up 150% since 2011.^{[111](#)}

- Ten public company CEOs made more than \$1 million in income in 2022, according to data compiled by Business First. M&T Bank CEO René Jones topped the list, with a pay package of \$8.8 million, followed by National Fuel CEO David Bauer (\$6.5 million) and Allient CEO Richard Warzala (\$4.7 million).^{[112](#)} The previous year, ACV's George Chamoun had topped the list, with a \$17 million pay package.
- The fortune of Robert Wilmers, the longtime driving force behind the rise of M&T Bank and the formation of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership - with its perennial focus on how taxes and regulation were hurting business in the region - reached \$1 billion not long before his death in 2017.^{[113](#)}
- Six healthcare CEOs and six health insurance CEOs made more than \$1 million in 2022, and eight leaders of other local nonprofits had pay packages worth more than \$500,000 in 2022, according to Business First.^{[114](#)} Despite the frequency with which wealthy, powerful people complain about taxes and regulation and the costs local and state policies are imposing on their businesses, they are doing quite well for themselves.

Public authority board member income data included in section VI sheds further light on the incomes of leading local power players.

SUBSIDIES FOR BIG BUSINESS AND REAL ESTATE INTERESTS

A second, closely-related priority for the local power structure is keeping government subsidies for real estate development (masquerading as “economic development”) flowing. The array of programs and mechanisms through which they obtain these subsidies is dizzying and includes direct grants of cash and property, tax-free bond financing, tax-free zones, and sales, mortgage, and real property tax exemptions. Various programs are managed at the city, county, and state level, by an also-dizzying array of industrial development agencies and other offices and public authorities, presided over largely by local power players.

This subsidy regime has long been a major priority for the local power structure. The Buffalo Niagara Partnership perennially boosts subsidy programs in its public advocacy, and advocates against adding requirements to them.^{[115](#)} When elected officials dare to step out of line and oppose subsidies, they face backlash from the power structure, as was the case when mayoral candidate India Walton criticized the 485-a subsidy program during her 2021 campaign.^{[116](#)}

Ostensibly, subsidies are intended to support job creation, though studies have shown that they actually provide little in the way of an economic boost and are often riddled with loopholes, with no meaningful strings attached.^{[117](#)} Subsidies also often simply subsidize local businesses to move around, generating construction activity but doing little in the way to attract new investment and generate new long-term employment, as has been the case with Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus. They do, however, put money in the pockets of wealthy property owners and businesses.^{[118](#)}

The city has doled out millions in tax breaks to wealthy developers under the state-authorized 485-a program, which grants tax breaks for mixed commercial-residential development. In one example, Benderson Development had obtained \$6 million in 485-a subsidies simply by adding one apartment to what is otherwise a commercial building.¹¹⁹ The \$950 million subsidy to build a Tesla plant under Governor Cuomo's Buffalo Billion program was named by one national think tank as one of the country's most wasteful subsidies, in part for failing to achieve promised jobs numbers.¹²⁰

Besides subsidies, other sources of government largesse such as leases, contracts, deposits, and bonding are also major priorities for key power players. Carl Paladino's Ellicott Development, for instance, had \$10 million in local, state, and federal government leases as of 2010, making Paladino perhaps a top beneficiary of the government spending he regularly lambasts.¹²¹

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES: DOWNTOWN, THE WATERFRONT, MARKET-RATE HOUSING, AND PARKING

The power structure has very particular priorities for the kinds of development that should occur (and receive government subsidies and support):

- **Development in core areas of speculation, particularly downtown and the waterfront.** Downtown and the waterfront have been a major focus of the local power structure for decades, with a succession of plans and projects that have often been a major priority for public officials. Despite all the subsidies and focus, however, the record is extremely mixed. Venture outside the headquarters of M&T Bank and you will find little

pedestrian traffic, vast tracts of empty parking lots in central locations, neglected public plazas, and a major building, AM&A's, that has stood empty for years. The big business- and developer-oriented framework, with its neglect of public amenities, planning, and community assets, likely contributes to these failures. As an example, the city recently acted aggressively to shut down a key cultural asset downtown and one of the city's only sources of temporary affordable housing, the Buffalo Niagara Hostel.[122](#)

The waterfront has fared slightly better, though it remains a largely suburban visitor-oriented amenity, and a major publicly-subsidized project there, Nick Sinatra's Heritage Point, has been delayed to the point where it is now being fined by New York State.[123](#)

- **Silver bullets and big developers.** Silver bullet projects, such as the ill-fated attempt to bring a Bass Pro to the waterfront and the Buffalo Billion-funded Tesla plant, are a perennial fixation of the local power structure, as are big-ticket developers like Doug Jemal.
- **Opposition to affordable housing.** The Buffalo Niagara Partnership and local developers were strongly opposed to an inclusionary zoning policy, which would have required the inclusion of affordable housing units in market-rate projects.[124](#) The policy did not move forward as a result. Rocco Termini was recently quoted in the Buffalo News saying that "low income housing does not work," which pretty much captures where the local power structure stands on affordable housing – in a city where 48% of renters are housing cost-burdened.[125](#) The same article noted that Rochester has nearly twice the percentage of state-regulated affordable units as Buffalo

- **Parking and car-oriented development.** The vast sea of parking lots downtown is perhaps all the evidence one needs that this has been a major priority for the local power structure for decades, with regular warnings about parking shortages.¹²⁶ There are some signs that this is shifting; Kyle Ciminelli, for instance, emphasized “walkability” and getting away from car-centered development as a key priority for downtown in his interview with Buffalo Rising.¹²⁷

In sum, the development focus is on building a downtown for suburbanites: with lots of parking, suburban-style amenities, and luxury and market-rate housing. The waterfront village neighborhood – a wealthy enclave that blocks off public access to a significant portion of the waterfront and limits connectivity to what was previously known as LaSalle Park – is what success looks like in this framework.

This focus – and the resulting neglect of the city’s neighborhoods – has had disproportionate impacts on Black residents of the East Side. There the city has pursued a decades-long strategy of widespread demolition and then sitting on land, with no plan to develop much-needed affordable housing or build back neighborhood density.

Though it has historically not been a power structure priority, there are signs that this land may be leveraged, in the near future, for speculative real estate development that displaces current residents. In 2019, Canadian investor Jeffrey Wynn of Gold Wynn (now one of the city’s top landlords) told the Buffalo News that he was “very encouraged” by the opportunity he saw in the “huge tracts of land” on the East Side of Buffalo to build infill residential housing.¹²⁸ The article noted that Wynn saw particular opportunity in younger millennials and suburbanites that wanted to live in rental housing in the city.

The power structure has also aligned behind a major project on the East Side in recent years. The racist mass shooting at Tops on Jefferson Avenue brought national scrutiny to the East Side and segregation in Buffalo, and this, in tandem with funding from the Biden administration, led to plans moving forward to cap the Kensington Expressway. There has long been community opposition to the highway, which replaced the grade-level Humboldt Parkway, designed by Olmsted, and drove a major dividing line through Buffalo's Black neighborhoods.

The community has been somewhat split over the current plan to cap the highway, however, and opposition to the project – and support for doing away with the expressway and restoring Humboldt Parkway at grade-level – has been growing.¹²⁹ Still, the project is moving ahead. The local power structure has long been settled on the idea of capping the highway, as is visible in advocacy agendas, op-eds, and the full-throated support of Governor Hochul, Assemblymember Crystal Peoples-Stokes, and other local leaders.¹³⁰

FIGHTING WORKER PAY AND POWER

The local power structure, led by the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, frequently fights policies that benefit workers, and advances initiatives intended to limit the power of labor unions. The Partnership has perennially opposed minimum wage increases,¹³¹ sought pension cuts,¹³² and fought paid sick leave.¹³³ This continues today, as its 2024 agenda is littered with efforts to limit workers' rights.¹³⁴

Local power players have also taken on some special initiatives to fight unions locally. For years, the Buffalo Niagara Partnership and M&T Bank CEO Robert Wilmers made education reform – meaning privatization, teacher pay and

benefit cuts, and other incursions on the power of teachers unions – a major priority. Wilmers’ especially active leadership role in this push prompted the Buffalo Teachers Federation to pull its money from M&T Bank in 2005.^{[135](#)} The local power structure does enter into alliances with some unions, as described in section VI.

Prominent local corporations do not have a particularly strong record of treating their workers well. In 2022 the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined Rich Products and placed it on its severe violators list after a worker died at one of its Illinois facilities because of a lack of required safety procedures. A Department of Labor official told *In These Times* that “[the list is] for companies that have a total disregard for worker safety, quite frankly... It’s for the really bad apples.”^{[136](#)} Multiple workers have been killed at the plant in recent years. The incidents have prompted no in-depth reporting from Buffalo media.

Closer to home, workers in the process of organizing a union at the Doug Jemal-owned Hyatt Regency recently filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board alleging that the hotel had been engaging in union-busting, including threatening and firing workers.^{[137](#)}

POLICING

The local power structure benefits from policing that prioritizes business and real estate interests over public safety needs, specifically targets low-income people of color while ignoring their communities’ safety needs, and represses protest.^{[138](#)}

Local business and real estate interests rely on direct lines of communication with the Buffalo Police Department in order to ensure their priorities are taken care of.¹³⁹ The power structure expresses its support for the current policing paradigm in a variety of ways, including police-oriented philanthropic giving through organizations like the Buffalo Renaissance Foundation and the 100 Club of Buffalo, both of which are key gathering points for local elites.

One notable example of developer support for police repression of protest is developer Doug Jemal's contribution of \$50,000 towards the legal defense of police officers that shoved a 75-year-old protester to the ground during a 2020 Black Lives Matter protester, fracturing his skull.¹⁴⁰ Jemal is a Trump-pardoned felon (see section VI).

Top local law enforcement officials focus largely on street crime, while ignoring corporate crime and high-level corruption. For example, former US prosecutor William Hochul, husband of Governor Kathy Hochul, gained recognition for using racketeering laws to target low-level street gangs.¹⁴¹ Ironically, he then took a high-paying job at a corporate conglomerate with a conspiracy/racketeering conviction in its past (see section VI). The Buffalo Billion corruption scandal investigation started during Hochul's time in office; it was initiated not by Hochul but by the US prosecutor in New York City, Preet Bharara.

As with subsidies, the local power structure's opposition to public spending and supposed fiscal discipline has not extended to police spending in recent years, even as it has contributed significantly to the city's budget crisis. The city's generous new police contract won praise from the Buffalo News editorial board and the Buffalo Niagara Partnership was

silent, suggesting the deal had the business community's support, despite its fiscal implications.¹⁴² Lawsuit settlements stemming from police violence have been a major contributor to the city's worsening financial picture as a result of settlements; the city recently had to go to bond markets in order to pay a \$43 million settlement to a woman paralyzed as a result of reckless police driving.¹⁴³

OPPOSITION TO FOSSIL FUEL AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION

Leading local power players fight aggressively against attempts to regulate fossil fuel use, even as they attempt to market themselves and the region as green and climate-friendly.

This can be seen in the advocacy of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, which has made opposition to fossil fuel regulation a core component of its agenda in recent years, sounding frequent alarm bells about state legislation aimed at reducing natural gas use in New York State.¹⁴⁴ This advocacy may be in part due to the prominence of the local gas utility, National Fuel, at the organization - it is a major sponsor and is represented on the executive committee. National Fuel has long marketed itself as environmentally-friendly, encouraging customers to "go green" even as it fights efforts to regulate natural gas, a major contributor to climate change.¹⁴⁵

Local power player Jon Williams is another example of someone who has promoted himself as an environmental entrepreneur, even as he has been a top donor to Donald Trump, a climate change denier, and services the petroleum and chemical industries - including building a fracking wellpad, apparently for a subsidiary of National Fuel.¹⁴⁶

THE ROLE OF RACISM, SEXISM, AND THE REACTIONARY BLOC WITHIN THE POWER STRUCTURE

Though the local power structure is dominated by wealthy white men, it has evolved somewhat since the days when the Buffalo Club was openly discriminatory, and some highly-connected local power players are women and people of color. And in some ways, the local power structure has demonstrated growing concern about racism: the Buffalo Niagara Partnership holds an annual diversity, equity, and inclusion symposium, for instance, and the Oishei Foundation has made racial equity a major focus in the wake of the racist mass shooting at Tops on May 14th, 2022.[147](#)

These efforts only go so far, however; seriously addressing racism and racial inequality would require dealing with economic issues, such as poverty, in ways that would run contrary to their business and real estate interests and the priorities they embrace. Systemic racism also serves their interests in other ways – by dividing natural sources of opposition, for instance.

Furthermore, there are many signs that the local power structure casually accepts racist and sexist remarks and practices by some of its leading figures. **Michael Joseph**, a local power player, remains on the board of the Buffalo AKG, the region's most prominent museum, despite the fact that his company was exposed by whistleblowers for engaging in racially discriminatory development practices.[148](#) The lawsuits, which the company settled, said that the company had a practice of not developing 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 remains on the AKG board, he was forced to resign as chair of the Roswell Park board – a public authority subject to government oversight.)

Another more high-profile example of this is **Carl Paladino**, whose firm owns more property in Buffalo than any other real estate developer. Paladino has a long history of making racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic remarks.^{[149](#)}

Paladino made headlines during his failed congressional run in 2022 when it was reported that he had called Hitler “the kind of leader we need today.” He said this in a podcast interview with **Peter Hunt** of Hunt Real Estate, one of the more highly-connected members of the local power structure.^{[150](#)} Hunt responded not by questioning this statement, but rather by asking him for his take on the state and federal deficit. At one point in the interview, Hunt told his audience that “we're very happy that Carl is a citizen among us.” In 2021, Hunt’s residential lending company, Hunt Mortgage, was sanctioned by New York State for redlining practices that largely shut out minority borrowers and neighborhoods.^{[151](#)} Hunt settled with the state.

Paladino is the most high-profile example of a growing Trump-aligned, reactionary cohort within the local power structure, and which also includes Trump donors Jon Williams and Doug Jemal. Other top power players supporting Trump have included Jeremy Jacobs, Nick Sinatra, Kent Frey, and Brian Lipke.^{[152](#)}

THE HIDDEN CONSEQUENCES OF THE POWER STRUCTURE AGENDA

The prioritization of the power structure agenda and vision for the city has resulted in some obvious wins for business and real estate interests during Mayor Byron Brown's time in office: the mayor kept property taxes on wealthy landlords and developers extremely low, supported the subsidy regime, made core areas of speculative interest a top priority, and invested in policing. Meanwhile, he has neglected major issues such as poverty and housing costs. In some cases, taking action on these issues would threaten powerful interests; in other cases, they are simply not priorities for the power structure.

This points to a hidden consequence of the power structure's agenda-setting ability: when their priorities come first, other issues get neglected. An elected official looking to do the bare minimum can check the necessary boxes in service of power structure priorities while neglecting major issues for the many of the city's residents. The calls of a Jon Dandes or Doug Jemal get attended to, for instance, while those of community advocates get treated with disinterest and even scorn. This means that the power structure's overriding influence is relevant even in issue areas that are not a major focus for it.

It is sometimes glaringly obvious that this bare-minimum, power structure-first strategy does not work out well for the city's residents. Such was the case during the blizzard of 2022, in which 46 people died in Erie County, many of them people of color living in Buffalo.¹⁵³ The city's emergency response failures, driven in part by a mayor who had left the city's emergency coordinator role unfilled for years, came under national scrutiny.¹⁵⁴ The city's current budget crisis, driven by the power structure's opposition to taxes and endless thirst for

subsidies, could lead to the further degradation and failure of city services.

To the extent that the local power structure has dealt with losses – around climate policy and progressive taxation, for instance – they have largely come at the state level, driven by a growing number of progressive legislators in New York State that have broken with trickle-down orthodoxy. The state has a great deal more budgetary and legislative power to shape life in Buffalo than city government, which is perhaps why the Buffalo Niagara Partnership orients much of its agenda towards state-level action and legislation.

VI: THE POWER STRUCTURE'S INFLUENCE OVER GOVERNMENT

"It has been evident to the writer for some years that policies on vital matters affecting community life seem to appear suddenly. They are acted upon, but with no precise knowledge on the part of the majority of citizens as to how these policies originated or by whom they are really sponsored. Much is done, but much is left undone. Some of the things done appear to be manipulated to the advantage of relatively few. There appears to be a tenuous line of communication between the governors of our society and the governed. This situation does not square with the concepts of democracy we have been taught to revere."

- Floyd Hunter, "Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers", a 1953 study of power and governance in Atlanta

When Byron Brown first became mayor, one of his first meetings was with the CEO of M&T Bank at the time, the late Robert Wilmers. Wilmers, however, did not go to city hall to meet with the new mayor; Brown headed down to the bank's headquarters for an audience with the CEO.¹⁵⁵ Brown proceeded to meet regularly with Wilmers and seek his counsel on a variety of important matters.

The story illustrates the power relationship between public officials and big business interests in Buffalo, and the ways in which there is an understanding, shared by elected officials and the power elite, that government is expected to work for, and serve the interests of, local power brokers. It also points to the powerful role played by Wilmers and M&T Bank, and the degree to which influencing local government was a major priority for them.

The dominant power structure's influence is exerted through a variety of means. Some of these, such as its advocacy through

the Buffalo Niagara Partnership and control of key local institutions, have already been touched on. This section provides more detail on the array of tools and mechanisms it has at its disposal to ensure that its priorities are looked out for by public officials at all levels of government.

POLITICAL SPENDING

One of the major ways the local power structure works to influence local government – and perhaps one that is talked about the most – is through political spending. Local corporations, real estate developers, law firms, and their principals and executives make major political contributions in order to ensure that government officials prioritize their interests.

The below table shows state and local political spending over the past ten years by a selection of top local donors who are also prominent figures within Buffalo’s power structure.

TABLE 7: SELECT TOP LOCAL DONORS, STATE AND LOCAL GIVING, 2015-2024

Donor	Amount
Carl Paladino, William Paladino, & Ellicott Development	\$992,325
Phillips Lytle	\$904,255
Barclay Damon	\$807,966
M&T Bank	\$496,572
National Fuel	\$448,544
Hodgson Russ	\$426,545
Howard & Leslie Zemsky, Larkin Development	\$411,120
Delaware North	\$358,495

Rich Products	\$335,488
Montante family & Uniland	\$284,467
Michael Joseph & Clover Management	\$247,400
Doug Jemal, family, & Douglas Development	\$224,380
Paul Ciminelli and Ciminelli Real Estate	\$163,700
Nick Sinatra, Sinatra & Co	\$121,566
Terry & Kim Pegula, PSE/Bills/Sabres	\$36,575

Source: New York State campaign finance data available here: <https://publicreporting.elections.ny.gov/> Contributions include those from affiliated PACs, LLC, and key executives. Some of the above contributors, such as Carl Paladino and Ellicott Development, donate via many LLCs; those types of donations were aggregated and analyzed to produce this table.

Though there are other major contributors to local political campaigns – particularly PACs associated with labor unions – business and real estate interests are especially dominant donors.

The local power structure focuses a great deal of its giving on the executive level, and particularly the governor and mayor. Of these, the governor, and state government, are especially important. While the mayor is a significant local leader, the local tax base has been hollowed out to the point where the city is deeply dependent on state spending.¹⁵⁶ Local economic development initiatives, such as the Buffalo Billion, are largely funded and overseen by the state government, rather than city government.

This is reflected in the following table, which shows top recipients of contributions from the power board members that were found in the network analysis detailed in section IV. An automated matching process was used, and only very likely

matches were analyzed; giving through PACs and LLCs was not included. The data likely significantly understates the total giving of the group, but is a useful indicator of relative giving preferences. In other words, the amounts do not represent the sum total of power structure giving, but illustrate the distribution of their political giving interest in various levels of elected office in the city.

TABLE 6: TOP RECIPIENTS OF POWER BOARD MEMBER DONATIONS, 2015-2024

Elected official	Office	Amount	# Donors
Kathy Hochul	Governor	\$1,069,913	149
Byron Brown	Mayor	\$666,543	251
Mark Poloncarz	County Executive	\$371,356	89
Tim Kennedy	State Senator	\$362,373	113
Erie County Democratic Committee	Party committee	\$308,949	73
Andrew Cuomo	Governor (former)*	\$223,095	20
Chris Jacobs	State Senator (former)	\$135,419	111
Erie County Republican Committee	Party committee	\$120,253	37
Crystal Peoples-Stokes	State Assemblymember	\$106,643	71
Sean Ryan	State Senator	\$91,609	51

Source: Campaign finance data from the New York State Board of Elections matched with network analysis data compiled for this report.

On the city level, the difference between giving to the executive and other legislators is even more dramatic, with the mayor receiving more than 40 times the amount of the next closest recipient, Joel Feroletto.

TABLE 7: POWER BOARD MEMBER DONATIONS TO CITY ELECTED OFFICIALS, 2015-2024

Elected official	Office	Amount	# Power Board Donors
Byron Brown	Mayor	\$666,543	251
Joel Feroletto	Council	\$16,900	21
Chris Scanlon	Council	\$12,822	32
Zeneta Everhart	Council	\$10,000	25
Leah Halton-Pope	Council	\$9,747	24
David Rivera	Council	\$3,847	8
Joe Golombek	Council	\$3,355	14
Mitch Nowakowski	Council	\$3,250	11
Barbara Miller-Williams	Comptroller	\$1,200	13
Rasheed Wyatt	Council	\$430	6
Bryan Bollman	Council	\$235	3

LOBBYING AND THE REVOLVING DOOR

Many public officials move through the revolving door after leaving government, cashing in on the expertise, relationships, and public profile they developed in their government roles. These are often but not always high-paid lobbying roles, in which they work to influence policymaking on behalf of corporations and other organizations.

Perhaps the most prominent local example of this is the firm Masiello Martucci, led by former mayor Tony Masiello. Len Lenihan, former chair of the county legislature and county Democratic Committee, is also a senior advisor.¹⁵⁷ The firm perennially leads the list of local lobbying firms in terms of revenue, and lobbies on behalf of a range of public and private sector clients, including Kaleida, Sinatra & Company, Phillips Lytle, Erie County, and the City of Buffalo.¹⁵⁸

One of Byron Brown's last acts, as mayor, was to name the basketball courts at Delaware Park after Masiello; he called his predecessor a key mentor and supporter throughout his time in office.159

Another top local lobbying firm, e3 Communications, is notable for its ties to two likely candidates in Buffalo's upcoming mayoral election, Acting Mayor Chris Scanlon and State Senator Sean Ryan. E3 Senior Vice President Brian Gould, a top donor and close associate of Scanlon, is likely to take a position in his administration. E3 President Earl Wells has given Sean Ryan \$15,500, making him one of Ryan's top individual donors.160 One of e3's top clients is National Fuel, the gas utility, which has significant interests before city and state government. The company's city tax bill has declined dramatically in recent years.161

The below tables show top lobbying spenders in the region in 2022. Notably, Tim Kennedy - then a state senator, now Buffalo's congressman - led all New York State legislators in the number of times he was a target of lobbying efforts in 2022.162

TABLE 8: TOP NYS LOBBYING SPENDERS IN WESTERN NEW YORK, 2022

Company/Organization	Amount spent
National Fuel	\$327,117
Seneca Nation	\$308,710
University at Buffalo	\$204,705
Delaware North	\$120,252
Kaleida Health	\$108,000

TABLE 9: TOP NYS LOBBYING FIRMS IN WESTERN NEW YORK, 2022

Lobbying Firm	Amount Received	# WNY Clients
Masiello Martucci	\$1,341,503	32
O'Donnell & Associates	\$665,278	13
E3 Communications	\$220,000	5
Hinman Straub	\$217,415	2
Lippes Mathias	\$164,154	2

Source: Data from these tables was drawn from the reporting of *Politics & Stuff*.

Revolving door positions are not always formal lobbying roles. Former US Attorney William Hochul, husband of Governor Kathy Hochul, moved through the revolving door to become general counsel at Delaware North. He made \$1.5 million in the role in 2023 before stepping down.¹⁶³ Before being elected lieutenant governor, Kathy Hochul also did a revolving door stint at M&T Bank as its director of government relations. During her campaign, she made the dubious claim, later exposed as false, that she had not been a lobbyist for the bank.¹⁶⁴

GOVERNMENT OFFICES AND APPOINTMENTS

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. One agency, the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation, was set up in the context of a concerted effort by billionaires Robert and Mindy Rich to bring Bass Pro to the waterfront.¹⁶⁵ The Riches were friends and Florida neighbors with Johnny Morris, the CEO of Bass Pro. Mindy Rich and Larry Quinn, a close friend of the Riches, were appointed to the board. More recently, a Rich Products subsidiary received a contract to manage concessions at Canalside.¹⁶⁶

Appointees tend to be major political donors, which likely partially explains why they tend to be far wealthier than average. The following table shows the median and average income reported by public authority board members in disclosure forms.¹⁶⁷ Only appointees who appeared to properly complete the income section of the forms were included. All of these public authorities are based in the City of Buffalo, where the median household income is \$46,458.¹⁶⁸

TABLE 10: MEDIAN AND AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD* INCOMES OF ROSWELL PARK, ECMC, AND NFTA BOARD MEMBERS, 2022

Public Authority	# Board Member Filers	Median Income	Average Income
Roswell Park	8	\$622,500	\$3,276,875
ECMC	6	\$341,500	\$798,833
NFTA	7	\$287,500	\$794,032
Total	21	\$385,500	\$1,741,249

Note: income amounts were drawn from financial disclosure forms obtained from the New York State Commission on Ethics and Lobbying in Government. Only ranges of amounts are reported on the forms, so the low and high end of this was averaged to produce the figures for each individual; when spouse income was reported (it typically was not, even though it is required) it was included. Only individuals that reported income were included as filers; many leave the form mostly or entirely blank.

The medians in the above table refer to the middle-value in the data set; the averages are much higher because some extremely wealthy individuals sit on the boards. For instance, Michael Joseph, a Roswell Park board member in 2022, reported over \$20 million in income in 2022.

Many appointees, including wealthy ones like Rich Products executive Jonathan Dandes, fail to properly fill out the form, leaving important fields such as income blank even though they are employed. Even attorneys fail to properly fill out the forms: NFTA board member Adam Perry did not report employment income from Hodgson Russ despite identifying 38 public and private sector clients with significant billing (over \$5,000).

Sometimes, local power brokers also obtain staff appointments. For example, Howard Zemsky, one of the region's top political donors, served as president of Empire State Development under Governor Andrew Cuomo. The power structure also exercises significant influence over appointments. Brendan Mehaffy, the head of the city's Office of Strategic Planning, was hired at the urging of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, and remains in his position today.¹⁶⁹ The Group of 18 recruited many heads of local economic development agencies in the 1980s, and M&T Bank CEO Robert Wilmers paid for the school district's superintendent search in 2004.¹⁷⁰

Key members of the local power structure also run for office, often spending heavily to win their elections. This has been the case with Carl Paladino, Chris Jacobs, and Chris Collins.

CORRUPTION AND OTHER LEGALLY QUESTIONABLE INFLUENCE MECHANISMS

The influence strategies of Buffalo's power structure sometimes tip over into outright corruption and legally questionable behavior – or at least, someone gets caught, and evidence of how the mechanisms of influence work behind the scenes emerges into the light of day.

The most high-profile recent example of this is the Buffalo Billion bid-rigging case, which led to several convictions, including that of Lou Ciminelli of LPCiminelli on wire fraud charges. The Supreme Court eventually reversed Ciminelli's conviction on appeal, but the case provided an inside look at the machinations involved in winning a major contract, including payoffs to a lobbying consultant closely-tied to the governor, an unaccountable network of quasi-governmental nonprofits, and an RFP that was designed so that LPCiminelli alone could win the bid.[171](#)

Local power brokers also played a minor starring role in the corruption trial of former Speaker of the Assembly Sheldon Silver. During the trial, Buffalo venture capitalist Jordan Levy testified that he helped Silver invest in lucrative funds that were not open to the public, including one linked to developer Michael Joseph; that he helped Silver structure the investments in ways that hid his wealth from public oversight; that he charged no fees; and that Silver had offered Levy assurances that he would support projects that Levy had oversight of as chairman of the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation (ECHDC).[172](#)

ECHDC's most high-profile project at that time was the effort to bring a heavily-subsidized Bass Pro to the Buffalo waterfront. Levy was never charged with any crime, though his activities certainly raised questions of a quid pro quo. Levy is founding board chair of the 43North startup contest, which receives major government subsidies.

It is perhaps indicative of the Buffalo power structure's acceptance of white collar criminal behavior that two major forces within it have significant felony convictions in their pasts – albeit ones that they have been able to overcome:

- Developer Doug Jemal was convicted of wire fraud in 2007, as part of a case stemming from his efforts to influence a DC official in order to obtain government leases.¹⁷³ His sentence, probation and a \$175,000 fine, was a shock to prosecutors, and well below what sentencing guidelines called for.¹⁷⁴ Trump pardoned Jemal shortly before leaving office.
- The Jacobs family business is now known as Delaware North, but the family once managed its business interests under another corporate entity, called Emprise, that was convicted of conspiracy and interstate transportation to aid racketeering in 1972.¹⁷⁵ The case concerned a plot to conceal illegal ownership of the Frontier Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas by Emprise and various individuals, including Detroit mafia figures. Emprise's pardon requests were denied, and that corporate entity is now defunct.

MEDIA

As touched on in earlier sections, one of the major means through which the local power structure wields influence is through local media. Media outlets such as the Buffalo News, as well as local TV and radio, often amplify the favored narratives and priorities of the power structure - which it depends on for advertising dollars and with which its managers are integrated, as noted in section IV.

This can be seen, for instance, in how local media dutifully relays the perspectives and priorities of major real estate developers. Developer Doug Jemal has been the rising star in town of late. His recent request for \$30 million in state aid for redevelopment of the Statler building included

complimentary quotes from city hall official Brendan Mehaffy and failed to note Jemal's recent default on a \$52 million loan on real estate he owns in Washington, DC.¹⁷⁶ Jemal's default – a signal that the developer is in financial trouble that may impact the region, and that may be driving his interest in government assistance – was previously reported in the Buffalo News under a headline that somehow manages to make him look good: “Douglas Jemal says he's committed to Buffalo projects.”¹⁷⁷

At least the Buffalo News reported on the default, which did not merit mention in local TV outlets. TV now has a much bigger reach than the Buffalo News, and though it includes some critical reporting on local power players, on balance it tends to focus more attention on their ribbon-cuttings. These outlets also tend to focus a great deal of their audiences' attention on crime in Buffalo; at any given moment, stories of crime in the city receive top billing in these outlets' coverage.¹⁷⁸ In this framework, Jemal – a convicted felon pardoned by Trump – is presented as a hero, while low-income people and people of color living in the city are depicted as criminals.

Silver bullet real estate initiatives often get top billing and sympathetic coverage in the local news. The Buffalo News' fawning, tick-tock coverage of the effort to bring a Bass Pro store to the waterfront dominated its pages for nearly a decade, and is a prime example of how priorities of local power players (in this case, the Rich family) are reflected in local media coverage. The paper regularly ran news articles that promoted the store and boosted efforts to give major government subsidies to the project, with headlines like “Bass Pro's Ripple Effect: Like A Big Pebble Thrown in a Pond, The Outfitter's Success Radiates Outward.”¹⁷⁹

Importantly, some journalists at the Buffalo News took a more critical perspective, and their reporting and editorializing likely played a major role in Bass Pro's decision to withdraw from the project.¹⁸⁰ In other words, even though local power players have enormous power to dominate and shape local media narratives, there are still openings for competing perspectives.

PHILANTHROPY

Historically, Buffalo's elites do not have a reputation for generosity. In 1993, a Buffalo News headline reported that "Most 'Major Players' are Tight With a Buck."¹⁸¹ The article went on to quote a nonprofit fundraiser: "Proportionately, they're stingy; it's poor people who give the most...If the wealthy families gave proportionate to the poor ones, we'd be rolling in money."

This does not appear to have changed much since 1993. An analysis of IRS data indicates that higher-income taxpayers in Erie County give at a lower rate than those in other counties. In 2019, their rate of charitable giving ranked 166th on a list of the 200 US counties with the most top bracket taxpayers, and 12th on the list of 13 counties in New York State that made the list (behind upstate counties like Monroe County and Onondaga County; Richmond County/Staten Island ranked 13th).¹⁸²

Still, philanthropic contributions are an important way rich people exercise influence and polish their public profile.

The top two local foundations are the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo (\$773 million in assets¹⁸³) and the Oishei

Foundation (\$300 million in assets¹⁸⁴). The boards of these foundations include many members of the local power structure. Buffalo Niagara Partnership CEO Dottie Gallagher sits on the board of the Community Foundation, and the foundation's chair-elect, Steven Finch, is a National Fuel board member.¹⁸⁵ Oishei's chair-elect is Glenn Jackson, an M&T Bank executive.¹⁸⁶ Both boards include members of the Jacobs family.

There are also a number of smaller foundations operating locally, and philanthropic contributions are also given directly by wealthy individuals and corporations. This is the mechanism through which many local institutions come to advertise the names of local power players, on their walls or in their names (see, for instance, UB's Jacobs School of Medicine).

Philanthropy has a significant impact on the issues taken up by local advocacy organizations, many of which are nonprofits. The existence of or potential for support naturally influences how nonprofits approach their work, and which kinds of issues and strategies get taken up.

These contributions can also be leveraged in the wake of major scandals, as was the case with Tonawanda Coke. Former Tonawanda Coke owner Paul Saffrin made contributions of \$1 million to Daemen College and Explore & More Children's Museum in 2016, secured board seats on both, and was recently honored by Daemen.¹⁸⁷ Tonawanda Coke's history of pollution and major regulatory violations went unnoted in the press releases announcing the contributions.¹⁸⁸

THREATS AND LITIGATION

When powerful people and businesses in Buffalo are faced with the prospect of not getting what they want, they often turn to more aggressive tactics: subtle and outright threats, as well as litigation.

One major type of threat is the threat to move – an extremely effective tactic given the region’s history of capital flight and economic devastation. Delaware North, for instance, has threatened to move on several occasions. In 1999, for example, Delaware North sought subsidies for its new offices in the Key Tower, and in the process made local media outlets aware that it had options to move elsewhere.¹⁸⁹ The project secured \$17.5 million in bond financing and incentives. This was again the case in 2013, when Delaware North sought subsidies for a new headquarters at Delaware and Chippewa, and faced down significant public backlash in part by highlighting that it had relocation options. The project secured \$10 million in incentives.¹⁹⁰

When Buffalo Bills owner Terry Pegula 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.”¹⁹¹ The Bills and Pegula, who is worth \$6 billion, were successful in obtaining nearly \$1 billion in subsidies.

Legal strategies, including litigation and the threat of litigation, are also a key means through which the local power structure deals with government. This has had an impact on the city’s budget, for example: local developers and landlords filed numerous appeals of increased assessments with the city in recent years, winning significant reductions in their tax bills.¹⁹²

Legal strategies also come into play when local corporations are dealing with opponents in the community. In 2011, National Fuel filed a lawsuit against PUSH Buffalo for protesting its treatment of low-income customers, tying the organization and its staff up in litigation for several years.¹⁹³ Its lawsuit, led by outside counsel Phillips Lytle, was eventually dismissed, and dismissed again on appeal.¹⁹⁴ Tonawanda Coke, mentioned above, initiated a legal effort in 2013 to secure thousands of confidential documents from its chief opponent in the community, the Clean Air Coalition of Western New York.¹⁹⁵

ALLIANCES

The local power structure benefits from alliances with key constituencies and voting blocs in the city and region, which enhance its ability to influence government. Some are made in direct coordination and through business, social, and philanthropic relationships, and others are mediated by political leaders. Any analysis of these alliances needs to be offered with the qualification that they are impermanent, and dynamics can shift over time: a constituency that was a crucial ally of the power structure at one time may become a target as circumstances change, and vice versa.

The 2021 mayoral election provides a useful example of a moment when the power structure's alliances came into sharp focus. Brown's loss to India Walton in the Democratic primary sent shockwaves through the local power structure, given Walton's opposition to many of its key priorities. 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.’”¹⁹⁶ One can only imagine the hand-wringing happening at the Buffalo Club during this period.

The power structure – with its political spending, relationships, and media clout, in particular – played a key role in supporting Brown’s ultimately successful write-in campaign. But the power structure, on its own, does not have the votes to win elections. It needed support from several well-organized constituencies:

- **Patronage networks.** City hall officials and staff contributed heavily to Brown and staffed and volunteered on his campaign.¹⁹⁷ Though patronage networks have often acted as a built-in political machine for the sitting mayor, city employees, their unions, and public payrolls are also frequently a major target of the power structure; in this case, they made common cause.
- **Police.** A key ad released by Brown’s campaign featured police officers, prompting a legal complaint.¹⁹⁸ The Buffalo PBA (the police union) and police department leadership were also major contributors to his campaign.¹⁹⁹ The mayor recently returned the favor by delivering a generous new contract.
- **South Buffalo.** The city’s patronage networks and police force are both heavily based in South Buffalo, but the role of the white working class neighborhood and its leadership

particularly that of current Acting Mayor Chris Scanlon – in driving Brown’s victory is worthy of its own category.[200](#)

- **Conservative labor unions and their allies.** Though Walton secured some major union endorsements, including that of the Buffalo Teachers Federation, many endorsed Brown. Building trades unions, like the police union, tend to be more conservative and often align in support of key power structure priorities, but they were also joined by many other unions in endorsing Brown, as well as by the Area Labor Federation, the region’s top labor council.
- **Reactionary Republicans.** Though Republicans have not been major contenders in city elections in recent years, the party and some of its more reactionary, far-right figures played a major role in supporting Brown’s campaign.[201](#)

Though this coalition may take a different shape in future years, some aspects of the alignment seen in 2021 could be relevant in Buffalo for years to come.

VII: CONCLUSION

Buffalo's power structure has achieved clear victories in recent years: on taxes, subsidies, policing, fighting affordable housing, and keeping key government institutions focused on supporting its major real estate development projects and other priorities.

These wins have also been a disaster for the people of Buffalo. The massive budget deficit, driven in part by city hall's failure to tax rich landlords, is a prime example. The continuing failures of downtown – a development focus for decades – are visible indicators that the city's business and real estate interests are good at pocketing public dollars, but have an abysmal record of building a vibrant, livable city. The city's deepening commercial real estate crisis is in part a function of the subsidy regime, which has fed a glut of supply. The lack of support for neighborhoods and affordable housing has deepened the city's housing and poverty crises. And the policing paradigm, in addition to brutalizing many of the city's residents instead of prioritizing public safety, has helped push it towards bankruptcy.

The “renaissance” talk is increasingly unconvincing, and with conditions worsening in ways that are hard to ignore (poverty can somehow be dismissed, potential municipal bankruptcy cannot), power structure advocacy vehicles like the Buffalo Niagara Partnership will likely renew their emphasis on what they see as the problem: government spending on services; teachers and other public employees; taxes, regulation, and the overall “business climate” created by local and state policies.

We have to be crystal clear: the power structure is the problem, and the false solutions it advances will only do further damage to the city. While Byron Brown deserves a large share of the blame for his leadership failures, we have to remember that he did not come up with these ideas and priorities on his own. He was meeting with the CEO of M&T Bank (who made his primary home in New York City); making sure that city hall attended to the concerns of a Rich Products executive (who lives in East Amherst); and following key recommendations of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, to offer just a few examples from the report.

Sharpening our understanding of how the power structure rules Buffalo is, in some ways, an uncomfortable and dispiriting process: it forces us to reckon with all the ways in which the deck is stacked against democracy in our city. If they have so much power, do we have any? What can we do about it? And are there any opportunities to overcome its influence?

The truth is that the power structure is heavily dependent on the people of Buffalo, and therein lies power. They need us to pay the rent, to work, to follow their rules, and to vote for candidates that will not mess with the program. They need us to fight amongst ourselves, and blame one scapegoat or another. All the mechanisms of influence described in this report are necessary because they are ultimately a tiny minority, and their vision for the city is not popular enough to win on its own merits.

The power structure also lacks clear leadership. The days when Wilmers ruled the city are long gone - no clear leader or

leadership cohort has emerged in his place - and some of its key institutions are weaker than they once were. Its leading figures and its ideas are getting quite old, and losing favor with younger generations in particular. Given the crisis in commercial real estate, some of its leading advocates - real estate developers - will likely face hard financial times ahead, and their influence will wane. And there are signs that it is somewhat divided along demographic and ideological lines, polarizing into a reactionary/conservative bloc and moderate/socially liberal bloc that are far apart on some key issues.

There are openings to push back on a power structure dealing with this level of dysfunction. Next year's mayoral election presents one such opportunity. There will likely be candidates who will attempt to follow in the footsteps of Byron Brown, advancing the power structure's favored priorities, phoning it in when it comes to serving the people of Buffalo, and perhaps aligning with reactionary forces in order to secure the necessary votes. And there will hopefully be candidates who challenge this approach, break with the power structure on some of its key priorities, and present an opportunity to turn the page on the Byron Brown era.

We should also be mindful that while electoral politics is an important domain, only so much can be accomplished in the context of one election. The powers of city government are limited, relative to the state and federal governments, not to mention larger economic forces; and the power of business and real estate interests is such that even a progressive firebrand, if elected, would need to act strategically to avoid the consequences of their full and unified fury. While we

should fight to elect a mayor that takes a more democratic and egalitarian approach to governing, and understand that this will make some difference, we should also be realistic about these limits.

A movement for our city will ultimately need to go far beyond local elections: it will need to be rooted in our neighborhoods, communities, and workplaces, challenging the local power structure in a variety of domains, and with an understanding of the need to make common cause with people far outside the city of Buffalo.

If there is anything to take from this report, it is that we have to recognize the nature of the conflict we are in. Too often, we end up focusing all our energies at a much lower level, fighting on familiar terrain with bit players in the larger drama. A shared understanding of who and what we are truly up against can help forge a path for the solidarity necessary to overcome these dynamics.

APPENDIX

TABLE 11: KEY BUSINESS & REAL ESTATE INTERESTS IN BUFFALO'S POWER STRUCTURE

Organization	Type	Key People	Power Boards	BNP Level
M&T Bank	Bank	René Jones (Chairman and CEO)	31	1
Evans Bank	Bank	David Nasca (CEO; merging with NTB)	9	4
KeyBank	Bank	Michael McMahon (top regional exec)	11	1
Douglas Development	Real estate	Doug Jemal (president)	6	4
Uniland Development	Real estate	Carl Montante (chairman), Michael Montante (CEO)	10	4
Ciminelli Real Estate	Real estate	Paul Ciminelli (CEO), Kyle Ciminelli (president)	6	--
Ellicott Development	Real estate	Carl Paladino (chairman), William Paladino (CEO)	6	--
Sinatra & Company	Real estate	Nick Sinatra	5	--
Larkin Development	Real estate	Howard Zemsky, Leslie Zemsky	3	--
Signature Development	Real estate	Rocco Termini	3	--
Hunt Real Estate	Real estate	Peter Hunt (chairman and CEO)	11	5
Hodgson Russ	Law firm	Benjamin Zuffranieri, Jr. (managing partner)	24	5
Phillips Lytle	Law firm	Douglas Dimitroff (managing partner)	14	4
University at Buffalo	University	Satish Tripathi (president), Jeremy Jacobs (chairman)	13	3
Catholic Health	Healthcare provider	Joyce Markiewicz (CEO)	6	4
Kaleida Health	Healthcare provider	Don Boyd (CEO)	12	5
Roswell Park	Healthcare provider	Candace Johnson (CEO)	13	4
Highmark WNY	Health insurer	Michael Edbauer (market president)	7	1

Independent Health	Health insurer	Michael Cropp (CEO)	15	2
Delaware North	Local billionaire corporations	Jeremy Jacobs and sons (Jerry, Lou, Charlie)	18	1
Rich Products	Local billionaire corporations	Robert and Melinda Rich (owners), execs Jonathan Dandes, William Gisel, Richard Ferranti	26	2
Buffalo News	Media	Tom Wiley (publisher)	5	4
Pegula/Bills/Sabres	Sports teams	Terry and Kim Pegula (owners)	6	1
National Fuel	Utility	David Bauer (CEO), Donna DeCarolis (president)	11	2
National Grid	Utility	Ken Kujawa (market president)	4	3
Moog	Other (defense)	Pat Roche (CEO), John Scannell (board member)	16	1
Tops Markets	Other (supermarket)	John Persons (CEO of parent)	6	3

NOTES: CORPORATIONS WERE INCLUDED BASED ON A COMBINATION OF FACTORS: SPONSORSHIP OF THE BUFFALO NIAGARA PARTNERSHIP, INDICATING INVOLVEMENT IN BUSINESS ADVOCACY; PRESENCE ON POWER BOARDS (AS DISCUSSED LATER IN THE REPORT), INDICATING INVOLVEMENT IN THE LOCAL POWER STRUCTURE; REAL ESTATE OWNERSHIP IN THE CITY, INDICATING CONTROL OF LAND.

TABLE 12: HIGHLY-CONNECTED INDIVIDUALS (FOUR OR MORE BOARD SEATS OR MEMBERSHIPS)

Person	Employer	# Organizations
Jonathan Dandes	Rich Products	12
Dottie Gallagher	Buffalo Niagara Partnership	9
Thomas Kucharski	Invest Buffalo Niagara	7
Satish Tripathi	University at Buffalo	7
Thomas Beauford	Buffalo Urban League	6
Steven Finch	AAA Western and Central New York	6
John Scannell	Moog board member and former CEO	6
Douglas Bean	Mower	6

Byron Brown	City of Buffalo	6
Anthony Spada	AAA Western and Central New York	6
William Gisel	Rich Products	5
Scott Bieler	West Herr Auto Group	5
Peter Hunt	Hunt Real Estate	5
Michael Montante	Uniland Development	5
Kimberley Minkel	Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority	5
Jeremy Jacobs	Delaware North	5
Allison Brashear	University at Buffalo	5
Yvonne Minor-Ragan	YM Ragan Consulting LLC	4
William Paladino	Ellicott Development	4
Tom Wiley	Buffalo News	4
Thomas Quatroche	ECMC	4
Thomas Emmerling	Dopkins & Company	4
Sujata Yalamanchili	Hodgson Russ	4
Robert Brady	M&T Bank board, formerly Moog	4
René Jones	M&T Bank	4
Paul Vukelic	Try-It Distributing	4
Paul Ciminelli	Ciminelli Real Estate	4
Nick Sinatra	Sinatra & Co. Real Estate	4
Nancy Ware	EduKids	4
Michael Edbauer	Highmark WNY	4
Michael Cropp	Independent Health	4
Mary Hunt	Hunt Real Estate	4
Lorrie Clemo	D'Youville College	4
Kendra Brim	Tesla	4
Joyce Markiewicz	Catholic Health	4
Hugh Russ	Hodgson Russ	4
Gregory Duval	HSBC	4
Donna De Carolis	National Fuel	4
David Nasca	Evans Bank	4

David Bauer	National Fuel	4
Crystal Rodriguez-Dabney	Roswell Park	4
Christina Orsi	Oishei Foundation	4
Carl Montante	Uniland Development	4
Candace Johnson	Roswell Park	4
Brenda McDuffie	Buffalo Urban League (former)	4
Betsy Constantine	Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo	4
Benjamin Oblatz	First Amherst Development Group	4
Arthur Wingerter	Univera Healthcare	4
Anthony Baynes	A.J. Baynes Group	4

END NOTES

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25. <https://www.investigativepost.org/2012/08/08/white-hue-browns-cabinet-extends-politics-policy/>
26. This is reflected in this Buffalo News article from 2001, which noted that major employers like GM and Ford were not represented on many local boards.
https://buffalonews.com/news/on-the-board-circuit-potential-leaders-exclude-themselves-or-are-excluded--from-some-of/article_b59868b8-1280-5d56-bccd-f1e460605fff.html
27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2777096>
28. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/buffalos-population-growth-outperformed-other-upstate-cities-and-more-census-takeaways/article_97a8dff0-fd3b-11eb-addb-affb23763d67.html;
29. <https://www.forbes.com/lists/largest-private-companies/>
30. <https://www.hodgsonruss.com/assets/html/documents/Amid%20Life%20Storage%20Computer%20Task%20Group%20acquisitions%20experts%20weigh-in%20on%20public%20company%20trends%20in%20Buffalo%20-%20Buffalo%20Business%20First.pdf>
31. <https://evansbancorp.q4ir.com/news-market-data/press-releases/news-details/2024/NBT-Bancorp-Inc.-and-Evans-Bancorp-Inc.Announce-Strategic-Partnership/default.aspx>
32. FDIC deposit share data as of June 2023; Buffalo Business First's Book of Lists, 2022.
33. <https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/subscriber-only/2024/01/12/largest-buffalo-employers-2024.html>
34. <https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/subscriber-only/2024/04/26/commercial-lenders-in-buffalo-2024.html>
35. <https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/subscriber-only/2024/08/02/largest-mortgage-brokers-in-buffalo-2024.html>

There is no publicly accessible data source that identifies the actual owners of property in Buffalo (or in most US cities), and developers often use many different LLCs as ownership entities for their properties. While it is possible to identify the owner of the title to the property, such as the LLC, LLCs can often have many owners whose names and ownership stakes are typically not available to the public. Though New York State recently adopted new LLC transparency rules, it was stripped of a proposed section that would have made ownership disclosures available in a public database. Therefore, the data for this table was aggregated in part based on the owner mailing addresses associated with the properties. Though the developers likely have a high level of control over the properties, they do not necessarily own them outright - in addition to leaning heavily on lenders, in some cases they are also managing them on behalf of outside equity investors.

37. <https://www.ourcitybuffalo.com/the-rich-dont-pay>

38. <https://emma.msrb.org/P11747244-P21379950-P11778927.pdf>

39. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/buffalos-niagara-center-office-building-sells-for-whopping-89-million/article_f9ca4750-eabb-5294-97c2-2836d2286b97.html

<https://www.highmark.com/newsroom/press-releases/highmark-completes-move-to-seneca-one-tower-reinforcing-commitment-to-buffalo>

40. <https://littlesis.org/news/who-are-nick-sinatras-investors/>

41. <https://www.wgrz.com/article/news/investigations/2-investigates/city-of-buffalos-legal-business-goes-largely-to-one-firm/71-347177491>

42. <https://reinventalbany.org/2024/05/upstate-law-firms-reap-undisclosed-millions-from-ida-deals-that-cost-public-billions/>

43. <https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/subscriber-only/2024/01/12/largest-buffalo-employers-2024.html>

44. <https://www.forbes.com/profile/jeremy-jacobs-sr/>

45. <https://www.forbes.com/profile/robert-rich-jr/>

46. https://buffalonews.com/entertainment/the-quiet-billionaire-bob-rich-is-still-buffalos-ultimate-booster/article_027be9e7-1e25-5dd3-8762-a6885eb8fdcd.html

47. <https://www.buffalo.edu/news/releases/1998/12/3129.html>

48. <https://www.investigativepost.org/2023/10/09/further-decline-at-the-buffalo-news/>

49. <https://twitter.com/BuffaloGuild/status/1808989107218980969>

50. <https://www.forbes.com/profile/terrence-pegula/>

51. https://d1io3yog0oux5.cloudfront.net/_86c44bddd98881a5710dd5697573ae07/randcapital/files/pages/randcapital/db/251/content/RAND_2024_Proxy_Final.pdf

52. <https://reinventalbany.org/2022/04/bills-mega-subsidy-deal-by-the-numbers/> <https://nypost.com/2021/09/14/buffalo-bills-owner-threatens-to-move-team-if-he-doesnt-get-public-funds-for-new-stadium/>

53. <https://www.investigativepost.org/2018/09/28/successes-and-stumbles-for-43north-program/>

54. <https://simplywall.st/stocks/us/commercial-services/nasdaq-acva/acv-auctions/news/when-can-we-expect-a-profit-from-acv-auctions-inc-nasdaqacva-1>

55. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/odoo-to-add-350-jobs-over-five-years-in-wny-as-part-of-40-fountain/article_5835b8a0-41f6-11ee-a291-fb7487600473.html

56. From Buffalo News reporting on the Buffalo Billion/LP Ciminelli corruption trial: https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/on-display-in-a-manhattan-courtroom-buffalos-incestuous-business-ties/article_53cdd476-6789-57d7-bf31-1a09fe6a7322.html

57. Data was collected in May 2024, from organizational websites and nonprofit and corporate filings. For organizations that do not publish an updated list of board members on their websites, board membership data found in public filings is sometimes 1-2 years out of date.

58. IRS data and lists from Buffalo Business First Book of Lists was used to identify large and influential organizations.

59. <https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/news/feature/power-250/2024>

60. Some of these categories overlap. For example, the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus is arguably more of a real estate development organization than a healthcare organization.

61. The algorithm used was eigenvector centrality, which determines the influence, or relative importance, of a node on the basis of its connections to other influential nodes. More on eigenvector centrality can be found here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eigenvector_centrality Average connectedness was determined by averaging the number of connections of each of the individuals connected to the organization.

62. Michael Billoni, Robert E Rich: *Memoirs of an Innovator*, page 36.

63. <https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/?a=d&d=spec19740201-01.1.3&srpos=2&e=-----en-20-spec-1--txt-txIN-dandes+amherst----->

- <https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/?a=d&d=spec19740403-01.1.9&srpos=1&e=-----en-20-spec-1--txt-txIN-dandes+controversial----->
64. https://buffalonews.com/sports/baseball/inside-baseball-q-a-with-jon-dandes-bisons-hall-of-famer-and-longtime-legend-of/article_6ffc5c9c-2b1b-11ee-a96c-579bfeb654ed.html
65. Author interview with former city hall official, June 2024.
66. Voter file data.
67. There was a sharp dropoff after six - most zip codes, if they are home to any individuals in the data set, are home to one or two.
68. David Perry, professor emeritus of urban planning and policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, discusses the Group of 18 in "Recasting Urban Leadership in Buffalo," a chapter in *Leadership and Urban Generation* (1990). Perry interviewed several members of the group, including Lipsey. This analysis of the Group of 18 draws heavily on Perry's essay.
https://www.google.com/books/edition/Leadership_and_Urban_Regeneration/nlYFAQAAIAAJ?hl=en
69. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/19/obituaries/robert-g-wilmers-bank-chief-and-buffalo-philanthropist-dies-at-83.html>
70. The quote is from David Campbell of Computer Task Group, as quoted in Perry's essay (page 267).
71. Perry, page 271.
72. Bruce Fisher offers context on the Group of 18 here:
<http://www.dailypublic.com/articles/06072016/buffalo-billion-investigation-smearing-cuomo-screwing-buffalo> The role of Wilmers
73. https://buffalonews.com/news/in-business-recognizing-results-not-intentions/article_12182ef7-7771-5455-8d24-91714e774ce1.html
74. https://buffalonews.com/article_72fab48a-d8cc-5489-87d3-e3ae39f6c832.html
75. <https://www.wivb.com/news/local-news/buffalo/supreme-court-reverses-conviction-of-wny-developer-louis-ciminelli/>
76. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/government-and-politics/who-are-the-top-10-donors-to-india-walton-byron-brown/article_3ebba2bc-3826-11ec-98d4-33b905cdb560.html
77. <https://www.buffalorising.com/2024/01/podcast-building-buffalo-kyle-ciminelli-president-ciminelli-real-estate-corporation/>

78. https://www.instagram.com/p/C1-YKN4s_BS/?hl=en&img_index=7
79. From the following job posting. These dues may be out of date, b: <https://www.gbcma.org/files/GM-COO%20-%20The%20Buffalo%20Club.pdf>
80. Tripathi and UB Foundation:
https://www.ubspectrum.com/article/2021/12/president-tripathi-made-more-than-780000-plus-benefits-in-2020?fbclid=IwY2xjawFw2qRleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHX6a1kXbqQPK0PI1j4UGfOpylXMGdx1MPDk2T2Z55l1Xq4V9UGAocPwyAQ_aem_rb9hqllgBA3fnuwTQe6RFQ Gallagher and BNP:
<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/160365700/202421299349300122/full>
81. From the following job posting. These dues may be out of date, b: <https://www.gbcma.org/files/GM-COO%20-%20The%20Buffalo%20Club.pdf>
82. <https://www.thebuffaloclub.org/default.aspx?p=DynamicModule&pageid=397042&ssid=>
83. https://buffalonews.com/news/buffalo-club-quietly-opens-doors-to-2-women-minority-member/article_e7b2eafc-f0e5-5644-acc1-46283c90a4e5.html
84. This history is detailed in the Buffalo Club's 125th anniversary book, "Buffalo Club 1867-1992," by Ruper Warren.
85. See, for example, Shea's board meeting at the Buffalo Club:
https://buffalonews.com/news/local/lawsuit-by-former-sheas-president-blames-bigotry-for-firing/article_c4382fd8-561a-11ed-af97-c3091f027be5.html Lobbyist Jack O'Donnell fundraiser for Buffalo Common Council member Leah Halton Pope:
https://buffalonews.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/buffalo-common-council-candidates-albany-connections-draw-scrutiny/article_9e806074-e50f-11ed-8dd7-db6944e3f67e.html
- Former Erie County Executive Joel Giambra's meetings with his "kitchen cabinet" of white men:
https://buffalonews.com/news/giambra-advice-squad-sounding-board-criticized-as-short-on-diversity/article_62fdbfec-ad00-5655-b29c-9e850aee1d3b.html
86. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/just-say-no-to-uniland-dnc-handout/article_c632e2e2-855e-56ad-8ea8-7ca4f3a2c96d.html
87. https://buffalonews.com/news/chamber-rejects-merger-with-the-gbdf/article_8f38b9b7-da77-5b55-9259-2b93bbcdadaa.html
88. <http://www.dailypublic.com/articles/12192017/wilmers-imprint>

89. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/rudnick-prominent-player-in-wny-s-economic-development-efforts-to-retire-in-june/article_59f4bd41-0d42-5368-a00e-b242008707fb.html
90. <https://www.thepartnership.org/assets/pdf/Dottie+Gallagher+Bio+2022/>
91. https://buffalonews.com/news/chamber-launches-membership-drive/article_9f165e43-f598-56bc-96e1-41a069c7ba6b.html
92. <https://web.archive.org/web/20050422081929/http://www.thepartnership.org/wwd/>
93. <https://www.thepartnership.org/about/>
94. <https://members.thepartnership.org/member-directory/FindStartsWith?term=%23%21>
95. 2023:
<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/160365700/202421299349300122/full> 2009:
https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/display_990/160365700/2010_03_EO%2F16-0365700_9900_200906
96. <https://www.thepartnership.org/major-investors/>
97. Both companies were major investors as of 2013:
<https://web.archive.org/web/20130201143350/http://www.thepartnership.org/major-investors>
98. <https://www.thepartnership.org/2024/07/26/new-members-officers-elected-to-buffalo-niagara-partnership-board-of-directors/>
99. https://buffalonews.com/news/mayor-praised-for-seeking-3-year-property-tax-freeze-brown-in-state-of-the-city/article_c08ca34b-fd1c-5b1d-9d9d-4e77d708031b.html
100. https://buffalonews.com/news/buffalo-will-boom-if-economy-holds-up/article_fe49f3c2-cd5f-55fd-93ec-51237474c75b.html
101. <https://www.buffalorising.com/2024/01/podcast-building-buffalo-kyle-ciminelli-president-ciminelli-real-estate-corporation/>
102. https://buffalonews.com/news/wilmers-blasts-area-politicians-tax-burden-blamed-for-loss-of-jobs-people/article_28563c0c-f755-5362-a43b-677e7c0015a1.html
103. https://buffalonews.com/opinion/another-voice-downtown-renaissance-needs-support-to-continue/article_70d178b3-4204-500b-81ca-09f74777a8e6.html
104. <https://www.investigativepost.org/2024/06/03/monday-morning-read-97/>

105. https://buffalonews.com/opinion/editorial/in-a-positive-sign-buffalo-s-renaissance-is-attracting-out-of-town-developers/article_6c21a5dc-74df-546f-9356-dea0f4d877df.html

106.

https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/development/developers-buffalo-western-new-york-building-projects/article_21b19498-3b15-11ef-848a-b301f8356026.html

107. https://buffalonews.com/buffalo-next-new-york-state-economy-western-new-york-ceos-downbeat-view/article_91479afe-fb60-11ee-92eb-17b20d5e7036.html

108. Historically, the major drivers of Buffalo's economic decline have had more to do with federal policy and larger shifts in the economy, including: the closing of the Erie Canal as a major transportation route; global economic shocks and federal policies that prompted manufacturing operations to move; federal policies that subsidized suburban growth and white flight, as well as growth in the Sunbelt; absentee corporate ownership.

109. https://buffalonews.com/news/brown-praised-for-holding-line-on-taxes-in-his-proposed-budget/article_5213b7a7-4a04-585b-81a3-df0fc92e2d75.html

110. Analysis of New York State income tax data found here: <https://www.tax.ny.gov/research/stats/statistics/pit-filers-summary-datasets-beginning-tax-year-2015.htm>

111. All figures based on Forbes estimates as of 2024 and 2010.

112. <https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/news/2023/10/17/public-company-ceo-compensation-wny-m-t-acv.html>

113. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/m-t-ceo-robert-wilmers-is-latest-bloomberg-billionaire/article_042ce0e5-4e92-5a27-a03d-d0bfbe9983e0.html

114. <https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/news/2023/04/05/health-insurance-execs-paydays-1m-2022.html>

<https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/news/2024/03/07/hospitals-executive-compensation-top-paid.html>

<https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/news/2023/12/06/nonprofit-executive-leaders-in-wny-salaries.html>

115. https://buffalonews.com/opinion/another-voice-downtown-renaissance-needs-support-to-continue/article_70d178b3-4204-500b-81ca-09f74777a8e6.html

<https://www.thepartnership.org/2024/08/07/new-wage-mandates-could-put-wny-brownfield-projects-at-risk/page/18/>

116. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/buffalo-mayoral-candidate-india-walton-faces-the-business-community/article_f7327492-2237-11ec-b49e-cfc03563e0c2.html

117.

<https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2017/06/07/tax-breaks-new-business-new-york/101565388/>

118. <https://www.ourcitybuffalo.com/the-rich-dont-pay>

119. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/critics-take-aim-at-benderson-over-city-tax-break-for-one-apartment/article_966bda78-4d71-56d5-af03-d2abee5df1e0.html

120. <https://www.investigativepost.org/2022/04/04/wny-tops-the-list-of-most-wasteful-subsidies/>

121. https://buffalonews.com/news/candidate-paladino-is-biting-the-hand-that-feeds-him-albany-critic-is-states-biggest-wny/article_5cfd9375-4565-565a-b6d8-3f7e76100878.html

122. <https://www.investigativepost.org/2024/04/10/buffalo-hostel-shut-down-by-city-inspectors/>

123. <https://www.wgrz.com/article/news/local/state-fines-sinatra-co-stalled-heritage-point-project-canalside/71-5dcf9dee-e7a0-49fb-9630-2a5769903259>

124. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/permanent-property-tax-cap-is-among-partnerships-priorities-for-2019/article_8717d2db-4fdc-5544-9c9a-6a06390a35c7.html

125.

https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/development/downto-wn-buffalo-vacant-offices-housing/article_f6b37e72-7cec-11ef-9b0a-135d4426fc20.html Housing cost burdens:

<https://www.osc.ny.gov/reports/new-yorkers-need-housing-insecurity-crisis>

126. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/downtown-landlords-fret-over-lack-of-parking/article_90ce10a0-4c2b-5b3b-8c56-e906e3dda422.html

127. <https://www.buffalorising.com/2024/01/podcast-building-buffalo-kyle-ciminelli-president-ciminelli-real-estate-corporation/>

128. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/this-canadian-investor-is-bullish-on-buffalo-and-happy-to-say-why/article_7797292c-f502-5192-a971-8c50ec0e14cf.html

129. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/east-side-collaborative-project-urges-public-state-leaders-to-attend-town-hall-on-kensington-expressway/article_3d3dce6a-c5e6-11ee-a48b-dbddd7d2b60e.html

130. <https://www.thepartnership.org/2021/05/28/bnp-advocacy-insider-june-2021/> https://buffalonews.com/opinion/another-voice-skyway-or-the-highway-cap-the-kensington-first/article_f7ad2e7e-c960-11eb-86e7-a359935fe546.html

131. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/partnership-s-agenda-for-2016-includes-fight-against-hike-in-minimum-wage/article_9824aaaa-8af3-5447-93f8-f1e01786ee3e.html
132. https://buffalonews.com/news/cuomos-push-to-control-pension-costs-gains-support-from-business-advocates/article_b8f7f55f-b281-577f-8988-50d7b1a34a8c.html
133. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/coronavirus-dilemma-for-some-a-choice-between-being-sick-and-being-paid/article_986224d5-14d6-537d-9be8-be1fd5113a3b.html
134. <https://www.thepartnership.org/advocacy/advocacy-agenda/>
135. https://buffalonews.com/news/teachers-union-drops-m-t-citing-disapproval-of-ceo/article_5d93edc4-84f1-552b-be32-8d8112ce9ad3.html
136. <https://inthesetimes.com/article/rich-products-workplace-injury-drug-test-fired>
137. <https://www.wkbw.com/news/local-news/buffalo/workers-at-hyatt-regency-buffalo-accuse-hotel-of-union-busting>
138. <https://www.wbfo.org/racial-equity/2024-05-31/lawsuit-alleging-discriminatory-traffic-enforcement-by-the-bpd-seeks-go-ahead-from-federal-court>
- <https://www.investigativepost.org/2021/12/07/wheres-a-cop-when-you-need-one/>
139. In his interview with Buffalo Rising, for instance, Kyle Ciminelli said that there had been “problematic” activity at the library underpass, near Ciminelli’s Braymiller building, and that “I see a lot of improvement in how downtown is being policed, based on some of our feedback to the police commissioner.”
- <https://www.buffalorising.com/2024/01/podcast-building-buffalo-kyle-ciminelli-president-ciminelli-real-estate-corporation/>
140. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/developer-jemal-paid-50-000-toward-defense-of-buffalo-police-officers-in-gugino-case/article_3107396e-bcc5-11ec-bb9b-7773ad5abef8.html
141. https://www.niagara-gazette.com/news/local_news/u-s-attorney-william-hochul-looks-back-after-announcing-retirement/article_1b9be3d7-4201-5c3e-88ff-e5def3f79c37.html
142. https://buffalonews.com/opinion/editorial/the-editorial-board-police-contract-looks-like-a-fair-deal-for-all/article_b7f05ad4-b0a5-11ee-9ccc-6ff8303a37e3.html
143. <https://www.investigativepost.org/2020/07/20/police-misconduct-costing-buffalo-millions/>
- https://buffalonews.com/news/local/buffalo-to-issue-43m-bond-to-pay-settlement-with-woman-paralyzed-after-police-car-hit/article_c4d51a24-8e2b-11ee-a621-cf14c58694c1.html

145. <https://www.nationalfuelforthought.com/>
146. <https://littlesis.org/news/green-businessman-is-buffalo-areas-top-trump-2020-donor/>
147. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/buffalo-east-side-racial-inequity-disparity-oishei-foundation/article_a2fecc8e-6ddc-11ee-8764-d731c23ac6fe.html
148. <https://www.wkbw.com/news/local-news/lawsuit-accuses-clover-group-of-racist-practices-wrongfully-terminating-employee>
149. <https://littlesis.org/reports/the-paladino-problem/>
150. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220608204354/https://r-houseradioshow.buzzsprout.com/1304581/7898773-2-13-radio-show-carl-paladino>
151. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/state-accuses-lenders-of-redlining-in-buffalo-settles-with-hunt-mortgage/article_075d4e3e-671a-11eb-9864-b72cf4e5c086.html
152. <http://www.dailypublic.com/articles/01042017/whos-hosting-tomorrows-trump-fundraiser>
153. <https://www.wivb.com/news/local-news/buffalo/families-sue-county-city-over-december-2022-storm-deaths/>
154. The city has a Homeland Security Director that previously oversaw emergency response efforts, but was unfilled at the time of the storm, and for years previously:
https://buffalonews.com/news/local/after-compromise-mayor-gets-his-fleet-manager-and-common-council-gets-an-emergency-coordinator/article_a5c1931a-a736-11ed-8fd1-a7b7b14aa23c.html
- The acting emergency response coordinator, fire chief William Renaldo, was on vacation in Florida during the storm:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2023/01/19/buffalo-blizzard-deaths-emergency-response/>
155. Interviews by author, May 2024 and September 2024.
156. In “Recasting Urban Leadership in Buffalo,” David Perry noted that the Group of 18 saw the mayor and governor as particularly important, compared with other electeds: “The two political leaders deemed essential to regeneration are the mayor and the governor. These two come as close as any political figures to having the power of a CEO.” (page 274)
157. <https://mmcassoc.com/about-us/meet-the-team/>
158. <https://reports.ethics.ny.gov/publicquery/>
159. <https://www.wgrz.com/article/news/local/byron-brown-gives-his-final-farewell-as-the-city-of-buffalo-mayor-politics-wny-government/71-002b2101-ec5d-4d92-965a-60f7d01c6102>

160. The October 9, 2024 newsletter of Investigative Post noted Gould's likely role in Scanlon's administration. Donation data for both Wells and Gould is drawn from NYS Board of Elections data, and lobbying data is drawn from New York State Commission on Ethics and Lobbying in Government data, available here:
<https://reports.ethics.ny.gov/publicquery/>
161. <https://www.ourcitybuffalo.com/the-rich-dont-pay>
162. <https://politicsandstuff.com/2023/09/11/wny-firms-governments-and-organizations-spent-3-6-million-on-lobbying-in-2022-kennedy-is-tops-among-legislators-who-are-most-frequent-targets-of-lobbying/>
163. <https://www.timesunion.com/state/article/tax-filings-gov-hochul-husband-earned-1-9m-2023-19400385.php>
164. <https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2014/12/records-indicate-hochul-duffy-discussed-state-contract-018174>
165. https://buffalonews.com/entertainment/the-quiet-billionaire-bob-rich-is-still-buffalos-ultimate-booster/article_027be9e7-1e25-5dd3-8762-a6885eb8fdcd.html
166. https://buffalonews.com/entertainment/the-quiet-billionaire-bob-rich-is-still-buffalos-ultimate-booster/article_027be9e7-1e25-5dd3-8762-a6885eb8fdcd.html
167. Disclosure forms were obtained from the New York State Commission on Ethics and Lobbying in Government.
168. https://data.census.gov/profile/Buffalo_city,_New_York?g=160XX00US3611000
169. https://buffalonews.com/news/brown-skimped-when-recruiting-for-key-posts-despite-pledge-mayor-failed-to-conduct-national-searches/article_2d9b6471-aa9e-5e1f-acef-3d60dff23678.html
170. Perry, "Recasting Urban Leadership in Buffalo", p. 271.
https://buffalonews.com/news/local/education/wilmers-the-ghost-of-superintendent-searches-past/article_3b8b1629-7556-5b01-a4be-760a5f72b019.html
171. <https://www.wivb.com/news/local-news/buffalo/supreme-court-reverses-conviction-of-wny-developer-louis-ciminelli/>
172. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/19/nyregion/jury-hears-where-sheldon-silvers-money-went-as-us-rests-case.html>
173. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/douglas-jemal-trump-pardon/2021/01/20/2eac77a8-5b2b-11eb-b8bd-ee36b1cd18bf_story.html
174. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/17/AR2007041701027_2.html

175. <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/09/29/archives/emprise-corp-loses-plea-for-us-pardon-sports-conglomerate.html>

176.

https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/development/buffalo-statler-complex-douglas-jemal/article_c5e5be0e-7517-11ef-a029-af56394d5ae2.html

177.

https://buffalonews.com/news/local/business/development/douglas-jemal-buffalo-development-washington-dc/article_54d18920-6584-11ef-ac6c-e39a14ee551b.html

178. At the moment that this sentence was being written every major TV outlet in Buffalo was highlighting a story of crime in Buffalo on its home page.

179. https://buffalonews.com/news/bass-pros-ripple-effect-like-a-big-pebble-thrown-in-a-pond-the-outfitters-success/article_981b1430-3471-5d28-af35-67280bfa8e75.html

180. The Buffalo News' coverage of a report that was co-authored by the author of this report, Kevin Connor, helped move the local media narrative around Bass Pro in a more critical direction:

https://buffalonews.com/news/report-doubts-bass-pro-on-tax-job-estimates/article_3c9867fb-afad-589b-b774-b1c0adbfbfd51.html

Bass Pro withdrew from the project less than two months later.

181. https://buffalonews.com/news/most-major-players-are-tight-with-a-buck-and-the-city-suffers/article_4f69fce8-64b8-5970-afa1-af2ab84b3d30.html

182. This analysis was conducted using IRS data on tax returns for the highest income bracket in the data, \$200k+. A ratio of charitable contributions to income was used as a measure of relative giving. The analysis was roughly similar for 2021.

183.

<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/222743917>

184.

<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/160874319>

185. Reviewed in October 2024: <https://www.cfgb.org/about/board-of-directors/>

186. Reviewed in October 2024: <https://oishei.org/#about-board-and-staff>

187. <https://littlesis.org/news/museum-and-college-donations-help-clean-up-paul-saffrins-image-but-not-the-generations-of-pollution-his-company-caused/> <https://voice.daemen.edu/july-26-2023/paul-saffrin-honored-with-presidential-medal/>

188. <https://voice.daemen.edu/july-26-2023/paul-saffrin-honored-with-presidential-medal/>

189. https://buffalonews.com/news/delaware-north-relocating-to-key-center/article_eec123cb-4216-5f41-bec6-0a35e4421cc5.html
190. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/uniland-gets-10-million-in-tax-breaks-from-ecida-for-delaware-north-project/article_51970e5d-0184-52c1-bd32-8b92ffc3b33d.html
191. <https://www.wivb.com/news/local-news/pse-spokesperson-says-renovating-current-stadium-not-an-option-looking-to-build-across-the-street/>
192. <https://www.ourcitybuffalo.com/the-rich-dont-pay>
- 193.
- 194.
- https://www.nycourts.gov/Reporter/3dseries/2013/2013_01963.htm
195. https://buffalonews.com/news/judge-rules-in-favor-of-environmental-group-in-tonawanda-coke-case/article_38ddafa8-6b2e-5040-bfa0-86fe33e74b5b.html
196. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/government-and-politics/paladino-calling-on-business-leaders-to-urge-byron-brown-write-in-campaign/article_bfe31ce4-d51b-11eb-b2ac-7b4050d1bddd.html
197. <https://www.investigativepost.org/2021/10/27/obfuscation-from-the-brown-camp/>
198. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/22123288-buffalo-ethics-board-letter-of-complaint>
199. <https://www.investigativepost.org/2021/10/05/big-donors-to-brown-and-walton/>
200. https://buffalonews.com/news/local/citys-conservative-neighborhoods-powered-browns-write-in-win/article_6af94686-3ce0-11ec-8731-8bd695ef4031.html
201. <https://www.investigativepost.org/2021/09/02/campaign-notes/>

