

The Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency (BURA)

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1. What is the agency's website and contact information?

- http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/City_Departments/BURA.
- According to the website, there are several different contact names, numbers and email addresses, depending on project. They include:
 - i. 1. Housing, Housing Project Managers, Address - 920 City Hall, Buffalo, NY 14202, Phone: (716) 851-5035, Fax: (716) 854-0172;
 - ii. 2. Real Estate, John Hannon, Director, Address - 901 City Hall, Buffalo NY 14202, Phone: (716) 851-5275, Fax: (716) 851-5590, Email: jhannon@city-buffalo.com;
 - iii. 3. Marketing/PR, Melanie Gregg, Community Programs Marketing Manager, Address - 920 City Hall, Buffalo NY 14202, Phone: (716) 851-5468, Fax: (716) 851-5016, Email: mgregg@city-buffalo.com.

2. What geographic area does it serve?

BURA serves the City of Buffalo in the planning and operation of urban renewal programs.ⁱ

3. Who runs the agency?

BURA is considered to be a component unit of the City of Buffalo for financial reporting purposes.ⁱⁱ It is governed by a Board of Directors, currently:

- Mayor Byron W. Brown, Chairman;

- Brian Reilly, Commissioner of Economic Development, Permit and Inspection Services;
- Drew Eszak, Director of Planning;
- Janet Penksa, Commissioner of Administration, Finance, Policy and Urban Affairs;
- Alisa Lukasiewicz, Corporation Counsel;
- Council President David Franczyk;
- Councilmember Mike LoCurto;
- Councilmember Mike Kearns;
- Private citizen Virginia Oehler.

4. How are the directors appointed?

BURA was created under New York State's General Municipal Law Article 15-B §639. This statute directly states who should compose the board of BURA. It states that BURA shall be composed of the mayor of the city of Buffalo and eight other members including Buffalo's president of the common council, chairman of the urban renewal committee of the common council, minority leader of the common council, corporation counsel, commissioner of urban renewal, commissioner of administration of finance and two residents of the city of Buffalo appointed by the mayor, whose terms of office expire with that of the mayor.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, BURA is largely controlled by the mayor.



5. How is BURA staffed?

BURA has around 50 employees. According to the website, employees need to be or intend to be city residents within 6 months of hire.^{iv} Turnover at BURA seems to be low. In an Artvoice article "Blockheads," Steve Banko talks about employees of BURA who started under the Griffin administration and are still employed there 30 years later.^v

6. How is the budget spent?

BURA's four year proposed budget can be found at http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/files/1_2_1/BURA/BudgetYear34-37.pdf. According to the budget for fiscal year ending June 30, 2008, total grant income was \$26,822,008. Ten different grants made up that income with the largest being:

- Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) (\$16,510,228, federal dollars)
- HOME (\$4,728,820, federal dollars)
- CDBG program income (\$2,000,000, federal dollars)
- NYS Environmental Restoration Project (\$1,000,000)

According to that same report, total program costs totaled \$22,829,660. Twelve programs received funds from BURA with the largest amounts being paid to:

- CDBG program costs (\$8,122,523, federal dollars)
- HOME program costs (\$3,771,615, federal dollars)
- Section 108 loan repayments (\$3,157,430)

An additional \$3,992,348 was spent in administration and planning costs, bringing total expenditures to \$26,822,008.^{vi}

7. Are meetings open to the public?

BURA meetings are open to the public, although there is no information on its website letting the public know that the meetings are open. BURA does, however, publish its meeting minutes on its website as well as the dates of future meetings. BURA meets bi-monthly.

8. What services does BURA fund?

BURA, through partner agencies, funds housing, development and other renewal programs. Several programs target first time homebuyers. One example is the American Dream Down Payment Initiative, which helps first time homebuyers with down payments and interest. A second program, run by Homefront Buffalo, offers advice to homeowners to help ensure they are “mortgage ready.”^{vii} A general list of BURA programs includes:

- real estate acquisition and clearance
- housing rehabilitation and construction for low-moderate income individuals
- design and construction of site improvements and public facilities
- provision of grants and loans to facilitate rehabilitation of residential and business properties,
- as well as other programs designed to stimulate urban economic growth and to revitalize urban neighborhoods.^{viii}

9. What are some examples of BURA’s projects?

BURA has been in existence since the late 1960s and has influenced numerous projects throughout Buffalo. Examples of recent projects can be found on BURA’s website. These include Sycamore Village, Cold Springs III, Performing Arts, Hickory 13 and Myrtle 15. In addition to residential urban renewal, BURA also helps fund business development projects and typically does so with partner agencies. Such projects included Goodwill Industries Urban Center^{ix},



Fertility Acoustics on Main Street^x and Doorway Rug Service in the New Buffalo Industrial Park^{xi}.

10. What are some examples of controversies BURA has faced?

While BURA’s “purpose includes the general planning and operation of various urban renewal programs designed to prevent or eliminate blight and deterioration in the City of Buffalo,”^{xii} some people in the community feel that BURA puts a higher value on its relationships with developers than with other community organizations or community members. For example one community non-profit feels that BURA is quicker to complete projects that are headed by developers instead of non-profits. This same community non-profit was also wary of criticizing BURA too much, for fear that their projects will never be completed.^{xiii} Community members have also voiced their concerns at BURA meetings, when they believe BURA financed new development will be detrimental to their community.^{xiv}

One notable controversy is BURA's involvement in a lawsuit where residents of Hickory Woods, South Buffalo were awarded \$7.2 million for contamination in the area. In this case, many residents documented illnesses and property damages.^{xv} Hickory Woods was an area of South Buffalo where about 60 houses were being developed near an old steel site. Environmental risks were not fully assessed by the city and residents were not made aware of the potential harms.^{xvi} Once an environmental assessment was completed, the area was found to contain a large numbers of carcinogens.

Over the years, there have been many criticisms of the way that Buffalo spends its CDBG and HOME funds: for example, spending too much on staff salaries and overhead, failing to hold grantees accountable for poor performance, emphasizing new construction over rehabilitation, and spending money on market rate housing instead of affordable housing.^{xvii} BURA, like other independent and semi-independent authorities in New York State, has also been criticized for lack of accountability to the public and for not having to follow laws and regulations that govern normal municipal operations.^{xviii}

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ⁱ Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency (BURA). Retrieved on September 16, 2008 from http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/City_Departments/BURA.

ⁱⁱ Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency (BURA). Retrieved on September 16, 2008 from http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/City_Departments/BURA.

ⁱⁱⁱ New York State General Municipal Law Article 15B §639.

^{iv} Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency (BURA). Retrieved on September 17, 2008 from http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/City_Departments/BURA/EmploymentOpportunities

^v Koch, P. (2008, May 8). "Blockheads," Artvoice. Retrieved on September 17, 2008 from http://artvoice.com/issues/v7n19/cover_story..

^{vi} Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency (BURA). Retrieved on September 16, 2008 from http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/files/1_2_1/BURA/BudgetYear34-37.pdf.

^{vii} Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency (BURA). Retrieved on September 16, 2008 from http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/City_Departments/BURA/Home_Ownership_Counseling.

^{viii} Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency (BURA). Retrieved on October 2, 2008 from http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/City_Departments/BURA.

^{ix} Drury, T. (2003, August 23). Urban Center nurtures good will, job skills. *Business First of Buffalo*. Retrieved on September 25, 2008 from <http://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/stories/2003/09/01/story7.html>;

^x Real estate developer opportunities, Buffalo Niagara medical campus. *Buffalo Economic Renaissance Incorporation*. Retrieved on September 17, 2008 from http://www.berc.org/realestate_dev_bnmc.php.

^{xi} Business First of Buffalo. (2002, November 29). Doorway Rug to enter New Buffalo Industrial Park. Retrieved on September 25, 2008 from <http://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/stories/2002/11/25/daily32.html>.

^{xii} Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency (BURA). Retrieved on September 16, 2008 from http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/City_Departments/BURA.

^{xiii} Drury, T. (2008, July 11). Red tape stalls \$5m project. *Business First of Buffalo*. Retrieved on September 17, 2008 from <http://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/stories/2008/07/14/story4.html>.

^{xiv} West Coast Perspectives. (2008, September 11). NIMBYs lose round I in waterfront village. Buffalo Rising. Retrieved on September 25, 2008 from http://www.buffalorising.com/story/nimbys_lose_round_i_in_waterfr.

^{xv} *Business First of Buffalo*. (2007, October 17). Court signs off on Hickory Woods deal. Retrieved on September 17 from <http://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/stories/2007/10/15/daily24.html>.

^{xvi} Hickory Woods Concerned Homeowners Association. Toxic waste threatens a housing subdivision built in a brownfield. Retrieved on September 25, 2008 from <http://www.buffnet.net/~wren/>.

^{xvii} See for example, Koch, P. (2008, May 8). "Blockheads," *Artvoice*. Retrieved on September 17, 2008 from http://artvoice.com/issues/v7n19/cover_story; Heaney, J. "Block Grant Budget Does Little to Correct Wasteful Spending" *Buffalo News*, 2/9/05; and Partnership for the Public Good, Comment on the City's 2008-2009 Action Plan, available at <http://ppg-buffalo.wikispaces.com/Position+Statements>.

^{xviii} Kelly, G. (2008, July 10). Tim Wanamaker's gone, but then he was hardly ever here anyway. *Artvoice*. Retrieved on October 2, 2008 from http://artvoice.com/issues/v7n28/news_briefs/tim_wanamaker.