



# **UNDERSTANDING THE COUNTY CRISIS AND MOVING FORWARD**

A Commonsense Approach to the  
Erie County Budget Crisis

*a report of the*  
**ERIE COUNTY COMMUNITY COALITION**

**Updated November 2005**

**"Understanding the County Crisis and Moving Forward" is a report of the *Erie County***

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# **UNDERSTANDING THE COUNTY CRISIS AND MOVING FORWARD**

## **A COMMONSENSE APPROACH TO THE ERIE COUNTY BUDGET CRISIS**

**A REPORT OF THE ERIE COUNTY COMMUNITY COALITION  
OCTOBER 2005**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

A few commonly held perceptions...

*"We pay the highest taxes and what do we get for it? Millions of dollars spent on chauffeurs, company cars, and incompetent bureaucrats who dole out pork."*

*"I refuse to vote for any legislator who even suggests that we need a tax increase."*

*"I don't think that poor people, who don't help themselves, should get free health care."*

*"Our government is a farce; we need to give it to business to run."*

These perceptions are not uncommon in Western New York. But are they realistic? While we are frustrated with pork, patronage and taxes, we are also frustrated with layoffs and cuts to county services. A *Buffalo News* poll from March 2005 discovered that while an overwhelming majority of Erie County residents were opposed to tax increases, an overwhelming majority also did not want to see layoffs or cuts to services.<sup>1</sup>

With Erie County facing complex fiscal problems and the community very concerned about the efficiency and effectiveness of services, it is important to make sense out of the chaos. ***The Erie County Community Coalition has come together to move away from the quagmire of finger pointing and look for a more rational understanding on which to base constructive solutions.*** Paying attention to revenues and expenses of government is good commonsense. Therefore, this paper will discuss some common public misperceptions of taxes, followed by a discussion of tax-funded services, defined as the *public good*. The *public good* is those services that the community as a whole benefits from directly, or indirectly through an *economic multiplier effect*.<sup>2</sup>

From there, the *Coalition* will propose basic short-term and long-term solutions to strategically move our community beyond the Erie County Budget Crisis. ***These recommendations will focus on identifying, protecting and enhancing our community's strategic assets and promoting High Road Economic Development in the form of well-paying jobs with good benefits (public and private sector), safe neighborhoods, adequately funded schools, libraries and arts and cultural institutions, and a social safety net for the most vulnerable of our population.*** These recommendations are intended to build a tax base to gain the proper revenues for effective and sustainable community services.

It is important that our community be kept informed about how our taxes are utilized. Through public disclosure and analysis, citizens can determine whether their tax dollars are promoting the enrichment of their community, or whether they are benefiting a select few. However, it is difficult to understand public policy in a one-newspaper town and/or when it is analyzed in short radio and TV sound bites. An economic analysis of Erie County government's operations does not have to be out of reach of the public's understanding. Therefore, it is the goal of this coalition to communicate with our community in a practical and constructive manner.

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<sup>1</sup> James Hartman, *Buffalo News*, "A Realistic Erie County Budget," Sec. H1, March 20, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of an economic multiplier effect is that services rendered have a ripple effect throughout the community. For example, prior to the recent budget cuts, a senior citizen could use the "Going Places" van service from the Department of Senior Services to commute to their favorite restaurant for lunch, producing income for the restaurant owner, in turn producing income for the restaurant employees. The ripple would then continue as these people spent their income in the community.

Lastly, the *Coalition* has come to recognize the enormous traps that emerge when community groups work against each other and how such traps actually play into the hands of individuals and/or organizations locally and nationally whose agenda is to dismantle government and destroy the checks and balances between human welfare and corporate welfare. *U.S. history reminds us that government exists to promote the common good while business' mission is to promote profits.*

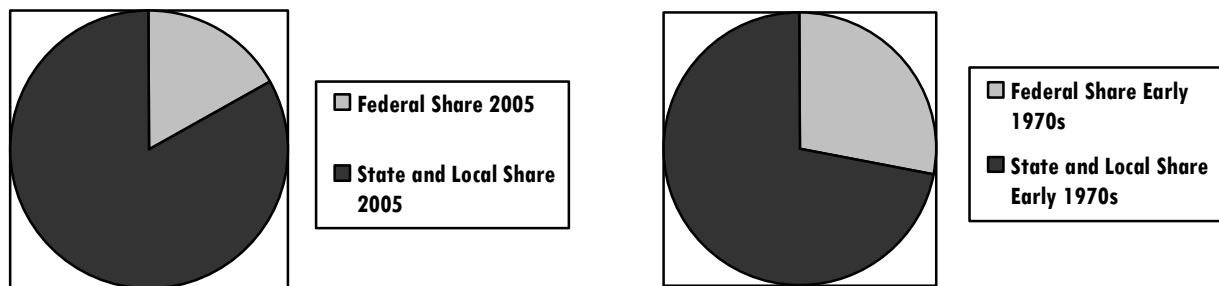
## 2. US TAX POLICY – A PRIMARY CAUSE OF THE BUDGET CRISIS

**Many Erie County residents feel they are very highly taxed. This perception is the result of decades of tax-shifting, both from the federal level to the state and local level, and from wealthy individuals and businesses to the middle class and poor.**

To begin with, tax rates are low in the U.S. compared to other advanced industrialized economies. Other countries utilize their tax structure by providing *public good* programs such as: health care coverage, pensions, paid maternal/paternal leaves, emergency benefits and higher education for all their citizens. This levels the playing field between the economic classes, secures family structures and guarantees opportunity and safety nets for all. In calculating the total 2003 federal, state, and local taxes, the US ranked 29th among the 30 *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)* countries. Only Mexico had lower taxes.<sup>3</sup>

**In the early 1970s, on average the federal government provided more than 25 percent of all state spending. But today, the federal share of state spending, aside from Medicaid, is around 17 percent (see charts below).**<sup>4</sup> The federal share is scheduled to decline further due to enormous tax cuts to the wealthy, trade agreements that have cost over 3 million jobs<sup>5</sup> with the subsequent loss of tax revenues, and a war and occupation that have dramatically increased already bloated military spending by an additional \$251 billion appropriated for the Iraq war so far<sup>6</sup> – costing the citizens of Erie County at least \$938.3 million.<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to balance the loss of revenues with increased spending, President Bush is calling for cutting vital domestic programs by \$214 billion over five years, including cuts in education, transportation, and law enforcement (this was before he called for additional cuts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina). The five year cut translates into an additional \$71 billion burden thrust onto states and localities as the responsibility for funding services further shifts to them. In addition, more and more of the costs of policies mandated by the federal government, such as health insurance for the poor and disabled, for homeland security and education standards are being shifted to the states.<sup>8</sup>

**Federal Shares of State Spending Charts: Now and Then**



<sup>3</sup> *Citizens for Tax Justice*, “Analysis of International Taxes,” April 21, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> *American Prospect*, Michael Lipsky and Dianne Stewart, “Under the Radar,” May 6, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The State Crisis: Manufacturing Jobs Lost,” February 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Congressional Research Service, October, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> National Priorities Project, “Local Costs of the Iraq War”, October 2005

<sup>8</sup> Michael Lipsky and Dianne Stewart, *American Prospect*, “Under the Radar,” May 6, 2005.

**Instead of protesting such an opportunistic transfer of financial burden, states copied the federal government by cutting taxes in the 1990s, including New York State, which cut taxes for the wealthiest 5 percent.**<sup>9</sup> The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that states today are short \$40 billion because they imprudently cut taxes in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> As a result, New York State shifted much of their mandated costs to their county governments.

**Erie County jumped on the tax cut bandwagon with a 35 percent property tax cut in 2000 and 2001, making up the loss in revenue by using up the surplus and one-shot revenues found in tobacco settlement money<sup>11</sup> and the sale of ECMC.** At the same time, spending increased beyond the mandates put upon the County by both the federal government and New York State.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to popular perceptions that Erie County pays the highest taxes, Comptroller Hevesi's budget review reveals that Erie County property taxes are markedly lower than those of comparable upstate counties.<sup>13</sup>

Once in the hole, the County then blamed Medicaid mandates, pensions and the cost of public workers for the budget shortfall, rather than acknowledging the error of cutting property taxes in 2000 and 2001. The County's response was to lay off workers and cut essential services. On the table now is the transfer and discontinuation of certain county services to local municipalities, for example, snowplowing, road patrols and road maintenance. Our community's infrastructure, education, health care, safety net and security as we know and expect them, are being dismantled.

From the time of the American War of Independence, Americans have felt overly taxed and can easily be persuaded to join tax revolts. The theory behind the tax cuts, called Supply Side Economics or Trickle Down Economics is that supply creates its own demand. The idea is that more money in the hands of businesses and the wealthy will lead to more economic development and jobs, the benefits trickling down to the entire population along the way.

**However, these tax cuts have hurt the middle class and vulnerable populations:**

- Recent tax cuts have gone disproportionately to the wealthiest of Americans, some of who – including Bill Gates, Sr. and Warren Buffett – say they do not need tax relief. President Bush got a \$28,846 tax cut in 2004. Vice President Cheney got an \$81,336 tax cut. And, in New York State, wealthy families making \$500,000 got a \$22,000 tax cut.<sup>14</sup>
- Federal proposals to repeal the estate tax will only benefit the wealthiest of Americans. Currently, the first \$1.5 million of the estate value is exempt, meaning a small percentage (the wealthiest) of Americans are even subject to it.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Fiscal Policy Institute*, "The Path Not Taken: How New York State Increased the Tax Burden on the Middle Class and Cut Taxes for its Highest Income Taxpayers by Over \$8 Billion a Year," June 4, 2005, <<http://www.fiscalpolicy.org/taxhistory2.htm>>

<sup>10</sup> Michael Lipsky and Dianne Stewart, *American Prospect*, "Under the Radar," May 6, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Due to a 1998 national settlement of smoking-related litigation, Erie County received \$22.6 million in 1999 and early 2000 from tobacco companies, followed by an additional \$211.7 million payment in late 2000 when it waived its right to receive future tobacco payments. This tobacco money was earmarked for capital projects approved by the Erie County Legislature.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Hevesi, "Budget Review of Erie County: June 2005," pp. 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18, June 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Hevesi, pp. 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Citizens for Tax Justice*, "Bushes and Chenys Got \$110,000 in Combined Tax Cuts in 2004 from Bush Policies," April 15, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, "Tax Cuts are not the Priority," October 10, 2005.

- Federal proposals to enact further dividend tax cuts will go disproportionately to the rich. Only half of all Americans own any stock, and most stock owned by the middle class is tied up in 401k plans, which do not benefit from dividend tax cuts.<sup>16</sup>
- The share of federal revenues contributed by corporations has declined by two-thirds since 1962, while the share contributed by individuals and unincorporated small businesses has risen 17 percent.<sup>17</sup> On the local level, corporate welfare and corporate tax loopholes frequently go unchecked, coupled with lax tax collection for corporations. This situation is often fueled by a desire on the part of government to attract business (ie. Bass Pro or Adelphia) or to subsidize sports teams without realizing any substantive economic development.
- With each tax cut we not only lose revenue from the tax cut itself, but we lose additional income tax revenue when workers are laid off to balance the budget. The purchasing power of these laid off workers is then severely crippled, hindering sales tax revenues. The *economic multiplier effect* of the layoffs is also significant. Economic studies show that every job lost in the public sector causes the loss of another job in the community, creating a negative ripple effect. Layoffs also represent a loss of services.
- In Western New York, the combination of a loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs, flat or falling incomes for 95 percent of households,<sup>18</sup> and a declining population has resulted in a downward pressure on revenues from sales and property taxes.
- Tax cuts for the wealthy mean more and more of the tax burden falls on middle class Americans, who often feel they do not receive sufficient returns on their tax payments. Although their taxes fund a host of services vital to the prosperity of their community, the middle class cannot access certain programs that target the poor. The antipathy toward the poor in this country is fueled by such a system. Because the middle class pays a majority of the taxes they are more likely to favor tax cuts, even if they disproportionately benefit the wealthy.
- At the end of the line, vulnerable senior citizens, disabled citizens, and children and their families end up carrying the disproportionate tax burden through sales taxes, property taxes, and new and increased fees. They may not be able to pay for the essential services they depend on, which are now being reduced and/or eliminated.
- The spending cuts forced by tax cuts also exert a downward pressure on labor standards. Traditionally, the public sector has set family-friendly labor standards that have raised the bar for the private sector. Some now suggest these standards are excessive and peg part of the blame for the county crisis on public sector union members. This in turn encourages the further erosion of labor standards in both the public and private sector, resulting in a “race to the bottom.”

**The tax cuts of Trickle Down Economics are actually *tax shifts* from the federal to the state to the local, and from the wealthy to the middle class and poor.** Federal tax cuts since 2000 have resulted in the share of the total tax burden borne at the state and local level to jump 15 percent. To close the budget gap, 29 states have raised taxes since late 2001. Since federal taxes are more progressive than state taxes, this tax shift from the federal to state level represents a tax shift from the wealthy to the middle class and poor.<sup>19</sup> As discussed above, New

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Chuck Collins, Chris Hartman, Karen Kraut and Gloribell Mota, *United for A Fair Economy*, “Shifty Tax Cuts: How They Move the Tax Burden off the Rich and onto Everyone Else,” April 20, 2004, pp. 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Economic Policy Institute*, as reported by the *New York Times*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Collins, pp. 2-5.

York State has responded to this tax shift by shifting more tax burden to the county level, putting incredible strain on Erie County in addition to the middle class and poor.

**In addition, the tax cuts of Trickle Down Economics have not been shown to stimulate the economy.** For tax cuts to act as an economic stimulus, they need to put money into the hands of those most likely to spend it: the middle class and poor. However, these tax cuts have targeted the wealthy, who are more likely to save and invest rather than spend the extra money.<sup>20</sup> Claims that tax breaks for the wealthy result in economic growth, job creation and higher wages for the average worker are not realistic. Although the top income bracket's tax rate dropped from 91 percent in 1963 to 35 percent in 2003, these tax cuts had a negligent effect on economic growth, job creation and wage increases.<sup>21</sup>

**Hurricane Katrina has provided us with the devastating results of how dangerous the tax cuts of Trickle Down Economics can be.** The same politicians that approved the president's upper-bracket tax cuts are now pushing for \$13 billion in cuts for Medicaid and food stamps, cuts that will land heavily on vulnerable citizens nationwide, including those in the three states most devastated by the hurricane where one out of three children were already dependent upon Medicaid<sup>22</sup>. The reality of the disparity between economic classes in the US is in stark contrast to the image of justice and equality we project to the rest of the world.

### 3. THE REALITY OF SOME OF THE COMMON PERCEPTIONS

**To review, tax cuts on the federal level have led to decreased federal spending for vital community services, putting the funding burden on our state and local governments. With both New York State and Erie County governments following the federal government's lead by cutting taxes, we currently find ourselves unable to fund the services we as a community want and deserve. Furthermore, these federal and state tax cuts have disproportionately benefited the wealthy, while the services lost have disproportionately hurt the poor and middle class.** To regain these services, county governments are forced to increase fees and/or raise sales and/or property taxes, which fall disproportionately on the poor and middle class.

With the Erie County budget crisis understood in this national context, it is important to revisit those commonly held perceptions mentioned at the beginning of this report.

#### a. Getting to the Bottom of the Pork and Patronage

*"Every year we pay our county taxes and what do we get for it? Millions of dollars spent on Chauffeurs, company cars, and incompetent bureaucrats who dole out pork."*

Erie County residents are angered by reports of excessive pork and patronage in their county government. However, **while hindering the county's ability to regain stability, pork and patronage make up a small percentage of the county budget.**

\$3.8 million of pork money designated for legislators was eliminated from the 2005 budget. It should be noted that much of this money has traditionally gone towards neighborhood development and community organizations. An additional \$130,000 was shaved as the Legislature scaled back on county vehicles, take-home cars and cell phones. Additionally, the

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<sup>20</sup> Chris Hartman and David Martin, *United for a Fair Economy*, "Bush Tax Cut Unfair, Won't Help Economy," June 6, 2003, pp. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Mehrun Etebari, *United for a Fair Economy*, "Trickle-Down Economics: Four Reasons Why it Just Doesn't Work," July 17, 2003, pp. 1-6.

<sup>22</sup> *New York Times*, "Congress Finesses the Storm," September 14, 2005.

county saved \$2.5 million by laying off nearly 50 “friends and family” of County Executive Giambra. The grand total of these cost-cutting measures was under \$7 million.<sup>23</sup>

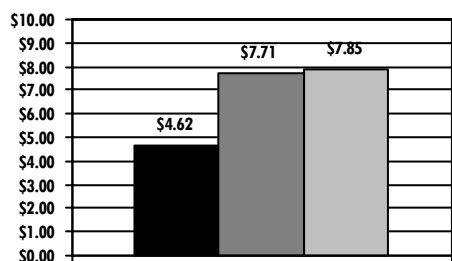
**There may be more pork and patronage that can be cut from the Erie County budget, and elected officials should be sensitive to the anger of taxpayers in this regard.** For example, the continued spending of \$500,000 on new furniture and the rehiring of former employees with connections to County Executive Giambra “simply rub it in, in exactly the wrong way,” as the *Buffalo News* stated.<sup>24</sup> However, even if several million more dollars were cut in these areas, the savings would still only represent a small percentage of the estimated \$118.4 million budget shortfall.<sup>25</sup>

Granted, excessive pork and patronage have put added stress on this fiscal crisis and should be eliminated, but with a deficit in excess of \$110 million, we need to look at other root causes.

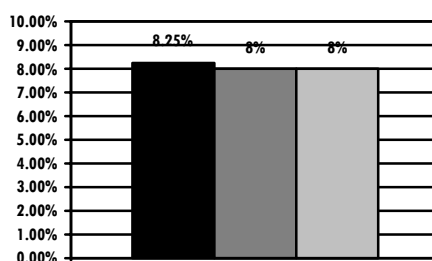
### b. Getting to the Bottom of County Taxes

*“I refuse to vote for any legislator who even suggests that we need a tax increase.”*

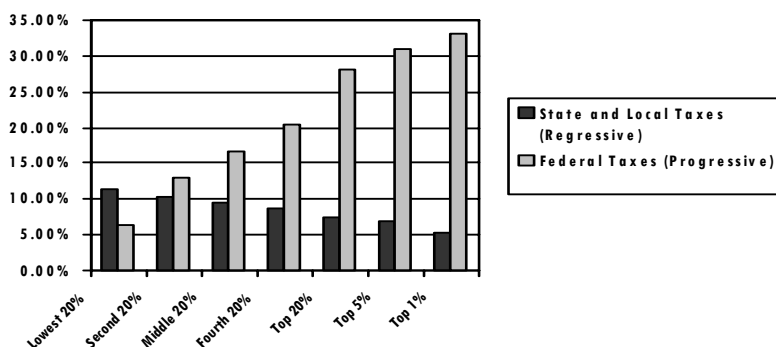
As previously stated, **Erie County property taxes are lower than those of comparable upstate counties in New York State, while Erie County’s sales tax rate is slightly higher<sup>26</sup>** (see tables below). The tax cuts of 2000 and 2001 cut the County’s property tax revenue stream by 35%, filling the gap with a now gone budget surplus and one-shot revenues such as the tobacco settlement money and the sale of ECMC.



Property Tax Rates for Erie County and Comparable Upstate Counties



Sales Tax Rate for Erie County and Comparable Upstate Counties



Tax Rates as a Percentage of Income

<sup>23</sup> Sandra Tan, *Buffalo News*, “Slicing County Budget is Not Cut and Dried,” Sec. A1, March 14, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> *Buffalo News*, “Patronage Revisited,” Sec. A8, July 13, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Sandra Tan, *Buffalo News*, “Slicing County Budget is Not Cut and Dried,” Sec. A1, March 14, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> *New York State Department of Taxation and Finance*, “New York State Sales and Use Tax Rates by Jurisdiction,” Publication 718, August 2005.

Considering the results of the *Buffalo News* poll, showing that Erie County residents want neither tax increases nor service cuts/layoffs,<sup>27</sup> we as a community need to be honest with ourselves: we cannot have our cake and eat it too. **If we want quality public services, we need to have the revenue stream to pay for them. As a community, we need to transition the debate to include gaining the necessary streams of revenue through equitable taxes that do not overburden the middle class and poor, while working to increase the tax base through quality jobs and high road economic development.**

Sales and property taxes are regressive by disproportionately burdening the middle class and poor. Income taxes, estate taxes, dividend taxes and corporate taxes tend to be more progressive by equitably distributing the tax responsibility based on the ability to pay. While income, estate, dividend and corporate taxes are utilized on the federal level, on the local level they often are not viable, leaving county governments dependent upon regressive taxes. The previous *Tax Rates as a Percentage of Income* chart demonstrates how state taxes disproportionately burden the lower income brackets, while federal taxes disproportionately favor the upper income brackets. **A true progressive system of taxation would have to be coupled with a tax shift from the local and state level back to the federal level.**<sup>28</sup>

### c. Getting to the Bottom of Medicaid

*"I don't think that poor people, who don't help themselves, should get free health care."*

A common misperception of Medicaid is that it is for poor people who have no intention to work and only want a free ride. The reality is much more complicated. **Medicare and Medicaid were established in 1965 during the Johnson Administration to help provide health coverage to the most vulnerable segments of our population: the elderly, the children, the disabled and the poor. It was considered an incremental step in gaining a national health system, envisioned by Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman.**

*Medicare* is the national insurance program for people age 65 or older, some people under age 65 with disabilities, and people with end-stage renal disease. *Medicaid*, jointly funded by the federal and state governments, provides funding for medical and health related services for more than 53 million Americans of all ages with very limited income. Medicaid is the largest payer of long-term care services for senior citizens. It provides a cushion of security for both citizens and the economy.<sup>29</sup>

**Making the case for Medicaid as an effective health program is easy. Studies show Medicaid improves access to health care.** In 2000, Medicaid provided health services to over 3.4 million people in New York State. Contrary to popular belief, 76% of these 3.4 million were children, the disabled, and the elderly.<sup>30</sup> **Studies also show that Medicaid improves health outcomes.** Extensive Medicaid benefits are associated with fewer avoidable hospitalizations across all age groups, decreasing the burden on taxpayers' pocketbook.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, **Medicaid protects and improves state and local economies.** Good health is an essential building block of any economically productive community. It is important to employers

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<sup>27</sup> James Hartman, *Buffalo News*, "A Realistic Erie County Budget," Sec. H1, March 20, 2005.

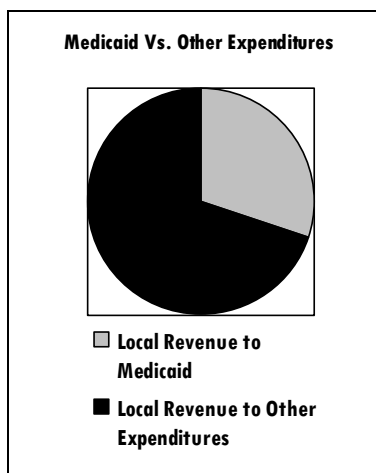
<sup>28</sup> Collins, pp. 3-9.

<sup>29</sup> *Families USA*, "Medicaid: Four Decades of Success."

<sup>30</sup> *Families USA*, "Medicaid New York, Medicaid Cuts are Bad Medicine," January 2005. (From Kaiser Family Foundation).

<sup>31</sup> *Families USA*, "Medicaid: Four Decades of Success," from Health Policy Department.

and key in educating our future workforce. Additionally, health care provides a significant percentage of vital jobs in our community. Hospitals, nursing homes and community health centers depend on Medicaid revenues to pay for the provision of health care services to children, the elderly and the poor, including 75% of payments for New York's nursing home residents.<sup>32</sup> Most people also don't realize that the federal government matches every New York State dollar invested in Medicaid, pumping money into our Western New York economy through payments to hospitals, nursing homes and community health centers, creating income the health care workers providing the care and services. These employees, in turn, spend their income at area businesses, creating a positive *economic multiplier effect*.



Many people do not know that **Medicaid is more cost effective than coverage in the private market.** In 2003, Medicaid spent 6.9% for administrative purposes compared to 13.6% for private insurance.<sup>33</sup> Additional cost savings can be realized with an emphasis on regional health care planning, public need, and through full disclosure. In July, a *New York Times* investigative report finds that Medicaid has “become a \$44.5 billion target for the unscrupulous and the opportunistic.”<sup>34</sup> Communities have a right to know when and where their tax dollars are being misused. Legislators and the media need to sharpen their focus on profiteering strategies employed by the pharmaceutical and health care supply industries, health care administrators, and nursing home owners, among others. Only then will we be able to address the proper use of our taxpayer dollars in health care. Unfortunately, due to enormous corporate

campaign contributions and advertising revenues, politicians and the media are too often silent on health care reform.

While making the case for Medicaid as a program may be easy, can we justify shifting the cost from the state to the county? In 2005, Erie County's local share of Medicaid funding amounts to nearly \$200 million, almost a third of all local revenue the county generates.<sup>35</sup> Despite this, Comptroller Hevesi's budget review of Erie County found that “Medicaid spending has increased much less than average in Erie County, up six percent annually compared to 8.6 percent annually for all other counties (outside New York City).”<sup>36</sup> Regardless, the question still remains: **Should counties be responsible for Medicaid payments? Although Medicaid began as a federal and state program, over the years the responsibility for funding the program increasingly shifted to the local level, burdening county governments.** This has put considerable stress on Erie County since a good portion of New York State's wealth is in New York City, although Erie County – an area of much less wealth – has a greater Medicaid burden due to comparatively higher elderly, children and disabled populations.<sup>37</sup> A statewide or nationwide insurance pool would provide for more equitable Medicaid payments and distribution of services.

<sup>32</sup> *Families USA*, “Medicaid New York, Medicaid Cuts are Bad Medicine,” January 2005. (From Kaiser Family Foundation).

<sup>33</sup> *Families USA*, “Medicaid: Four Decades of Success.”

<sup>34</sup> Clifford Levy and Michael Luo, *New York Times*, “New York Medicaid Fraud May Reach Into Billions,” July 18, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Sandra Tan, *Buffalo News*, “Slicing County Budget is Not Cut and Dried,” Sec. A1, March 14, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Hevesi, pp. 16.

<sup>37</sup> *US Census Bureau*, “State & County Quick Facts: Erie County,” July 2004,

<<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/36029.html>>; *FedStats*, “New York MapStats: New York (city),” December 2004, <<http://www.fedstats.gov/qf/states/36/3651000.html>>.

Medicaid is a valuable health and economic safety net policy. Proposals calling for Medicaid benefit cuts and/or community health care center closures may sound good, but in reality will only deepen the community's fiscal crisis. **Irrational health cuts and closures cost our communities much more in loss of productivity, advanced illness and familial instability.** Those making such proposals may not understand health care and the importance of Medicaid, or they may care little about community well-being and/or they may have an agenda to dismantle the role of government for the people and by the people.

#### **d. Getting to the Bottom of County Government**

*"Our government is a farce, we need to give it to business to run."*

The budget crisis has uncovered a high level of mismanagement, leaving county residents distrustful of their elected officials. Some residents, especially those in the business community, have suggested we need to run Erie County government more like a business. Some of the concrete suggestions include the privatization and/or transfer to the non-profit sector of certain county services (ie. select senior and social services) and shifting the cost of other services (ie. road patrols, road maintenance and snowplowing) to individual municipalities.

While these suggestions may save the county money on paper, they do not take into account the purpose of county government. First of all, government exists to promote the *public good*, while for-profit publicly traded businesses are legally obligated to turn a profit above all else. Proprietary businesses may or may not prioritize the *public good* over profit, depending on varying individual ethics and commitment to the community. **Privatizing county programs that exist to serve human needs would put a strain on the quality of these services due to the profit motive and/or the introduction of additional bureaucracy and administrative costs.** Furthermore, the desire for transparency lies behind the call for Erie County government to be run more efficiently like a business. People want to know that the taxes they pay are being spent effectively. Privatizing county services would hinder transparency since the providers would no longer be accountable to taxpayers. Making sure we have the mechanisms in place to hold our elected officials accountable is the real answer.

Second of all, in the past, Erie County government has transferred certain services to the non-profit sector. For example, approximately 65% of all funding in the Senior Services Department is contracted out to a variety of community organizations.<sup>38</sup> However, **county government must always strike a balance between publicly provided services and contracted out services, with respect to the capacity of the non-profit sector. To continue transferring responsibility for the provision of services to non-profit groups would eventually overburden these organizations.** Furthermore, there is a need for oversight within county departments that contract out services to community organizations. To return to the Senior Services example, without case managers to monitor the provision of contracted out services, there would be no mechanism to ensure quality and efficiency.<sup>39</sup>

Lastly, **the transfer of responsibility for certain non-mandated county services to individual municipalities would cost citizens in increased taxes on the town/city level.** In the past, the county has accepted responsibility for a range of services that are utilized differently, based on

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<sup>38</sup> Pamela Krawczyk, "2006 Budget Presentation for the Erie County Dept. of Senior Services," September 9, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Pamela Krawczyk, Commissioner of Erie County Department of Senior Services, personal interview conducted by Daniel Cross, September 20, 2005.

the needs of each municipality. This has led to cost savings along with efficient and balanced delivery of services.<sup>40</sup>

The provision of these non-mandated services on the county level makes sense since it would be excessive for each municipality to own and maintain its own snowplows, road repair equipment, and police forces. The idea that the County should only provide these services to municipalities that pay a fee for them may alleviate cost on the county level, but it would have to be made up on the town/city level. For instance, if Erie County were to charge Grand Island for its Sheriff road patrols, it would cost Grand Island an estimated \$400,000-\$500,000 each year. Since the town of Grand Island does not have access to sales tax, mortgage tax, state aid or other potential resources, it would most likely have to increase its property tax 60-70 percent to make up the difference.<sup>41</sup> A similar situation would exist for most municipalities that depend upon county services. Therefore, providing these services for a fee to municipalities means that residents will simply pay for them through their town/city taxes rather than their county taxes, potentially costing taxpayers more in the end.

In conclusion, **county government plays a vital role in our region by providing quality public services not only to the most vulnerable segments of our community, but by providing quality public services to individual municipalities.** There is no denying that Erie County government could and should be more transparent and efficient, but the answer is not the transfer of the provision of services to the private sector, individual municipalities, or the accelerated transfer to the non-profit sector.

#### 4. CUTS COST MORE

*Erie County elected officials' primary response to the 2005 budget deficit was to make cuts to a variety of departments, resulting in an estimated 1,500 layoffs and the elimination or downsizing of public services. As the following examples demonstrate, County officials made severe cuts in an attempt to balance the budget. In some cases, the budget cuts have created situations in which the County will face increased costs either financially, human, or both.*

##### **The Visitors Bureau**

The Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) sustained cuts of \$1.2 million, amounting to over half its budget. This has resulted in the loss of sixteen staff and the inability to adequately promote Erie County as a tourist destination. Already these cuts have meant the Bureau couldn't attract the 2006 Citgo Bassmaster Fishing Tour, an event that in past years has generated \$500,000 in tourism revenues. Furthermore, the cuts have meant the Bureau could not expend many resources promoting Buffalo as an arts tourist destination in the annual *American Styles Magazine* ranking, causing Buffalo to fall from 4<sup>th</sup> overall to 23<sup>rd</sup> amongst mid-sized cities.<sup>42</sup>

##### **Arts, Culture, and Tourism**

Arts and cultural organizations were originally scheduled to receive \$5.5 million in county funding in 2005. This money has traditionally been divided up amongst 48 organizations,

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<sup>40</sup> Pete McMahon, Grand Island Town Supervisor, personal interview conducted by Roger Cook and Daniel Cross, September 16, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> See *Buffalo News*: Mark Sommer, "Erie County Fiscal Crisis Cuts Deep into Tourism Potential," Sec A1, July 19, 2005; Tom Buckham, "County Budget Cuts Blamed for Steep Drop in Cultural Tourism Rank," Sec D5, May 7, 2005; Sharon Linstedt, "Bassmaster Fishing Tourney Gets Away," Sec B12 July 6, 2005

including the Arts Council in Buffalo & Erie County, which serves as a membership and central source of information for local artists and arts and cultural organizations. Due to the county crisis, 42 arts organizations lost their county funding, opening the door to the possible demise of several mid-size and smaller arts organizations that represent the rich diversity of Erie County, and who produce cutting edge art and innovation, programs for children and culturally specific programming. The Arts Council itself lost \$165,000, which has meant the loss of two full-time and two part-time staff and a significant adjustment in the way programs are delivered. Among the work that had to be minimized were the outreach and public awareness efforts of the Arts Council, a loss that could potentially impact the county's tourism dollars and efforts to attract new professionals to the area. A notable example is the shared effort between the Arts Council and the Buffalo Niagara CVB to encourage and garner votes from the general public to vote for this community as a top arts and cultural destination in the *American Styles Magazine* reader's poll.<sup>43</sup>

Above and beyond dollars linked to tourism, Erie County's cultural sector supports 1,575 arts-related businesses, which employ over 8,000 people. The economic impact of these organizations on the local economy is conservatively estimated at \$115 million annually. According to the 2005 Congressional Report, Erie County, compared to other New York Counties and counties nationally, is disproportionately dependent on business generated by the arts. The major slash to arts funding, essentially was a dagger to the heart of efforts to build and add value to the economy in Erie County.<sup>44</sup>

### **Senior Services "Going Places" Van Service**

As reported by the *Buffalo News*, 75-year-old Dorothy Mrzik regularly relied upon the "Going Places" van service for a ride to her throat cancer treatment. Another 1,600 seniors in Erie County also relied on this service. When county funding for Senior Services was cut \$750,000 this year, the van service was eliminated, leaving those who depended upon it with the burden of finding alternative transportation, which could prove damaging to their fixed income and their ability to remain independent in their homes.<sup>45</sup>

### **Youth Detention**

Following almost \$2 million in cuts, the County Youth Detention Center was forced to cut 16 of its 64 beds. This loss will not only rob the county of a much needed ability to rehabilitate youths before they end up in the prison system on the taxpayers' dime, but will also rob the county of revenue it has traditionally received from housing youths from other counties.<sup>46</sup>

### **Probation Department**

After the Probation Department's budget was slashed by a quarter, 28 of 94 probation officers were let go, pushing caseloads yet higher in a department that already had one of the worst officer-to-probationary resident ratios in the state. Now each probation officer monitors over 350 people. The Holding Center and Annex are experiencing an overflow of prisoners waiting up to six months for sentencing because there are only seven officers available to write presentence reports. These prisoners remain in the Center and Annex on the taxpayer's dime. Furthermore, the increased burden has inevitably decreased the level of supervision each officer can maintain over their probationary residents, potentially leading to more residents ending up in

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<sup>43</sup> Personal interview with Celeste Lawson, Director of the Arts Council in Buffalo & Erie County, conducted by Daniel Cross, September 13, 2005

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> See *Buffalo News*: Deidre Williams, "Cuts Hit Those in Need," Sec A1, March 15, 2005; Mark Sommer and Jay Rey, "Budget's Hidden Fallout," Sec A1 19 May 2005

<sup>46</sup> Gene Warner, *Buffalo News*, "Justice System Cringing at Impact of Budget Cuts," Sec A1, March 7, 2005.

jail, again at the taxpayers' expense. These higher caseloads also mean fewer unannounced home visits, one of which was successful in catching a child molester two years ago.<sup>47</sup>

### **Catholic Charities**

Catholic Charities, which traditionally has provided a variety of vital services for the county, sustained massive cuts to all seven of its county contracts, amounting to \$930,000 in losses. These cuts have resulted in the elimination of their Therapeutic Supervised Visitation Program, which last year served 230 children placed in foster care. That means this year 150 families will no longer be able to visit their children weekly, including Teresa Reed who, as mentioned in the *Buffalo News*, surrendered custody of her children after suffering depression due to accusations her husband had abused them.<sup>48</sup>

### **Child & Family Services**

In the wake of \$225,000 in cuts, Child & Family Services has been forced to sharply cut funding for Haven House's non-residential program and eliminate their Family Violence Intervention Program – programs that serviced 600 victims of domestic violence last year. As stated in the *Buffalo News*, Natasha Cox was one of these women, who after 14 years in a turbulent marriage, was able to find hope in the Intervention Program.<sup>49</sup>

### **Hispanics United of Buffalo**

Following roughly \$200,000 in cuts, Hispanics United of Buffalo was forced to close its children's services division, resulting in the elimination of programs to prevent child abuse and neglect, among others. In addition to the closure of the children's services division, the organization had to cut funding for its domestic violence program by 30 percent.

### **Salvation Army**

Two programs operated by Salvation Army – Employee Services and Youth & Family Counseling for People in Need of Supervision (PINS) – were eliminated as the result of \$220,000 in budget cuts. These programs served 500 people last year. The closing of PINS – a program that compelled youth to stay in school and out of trouble – will have a ripple effect in the community, putting additional burden on the police and courts.<sup>50</sup>

### **Central Police Services**

Due to \$750,000 in cuts to Central Police Services, the county's Forensic Lab can no longer process fire debris in arson cases, nor blood or urine samples in DWI cases. As a result, police are forced to send evidence to private facilities, which could potentially cost the county more than processing it in their own lab.<sup>51</sup>

### **Emergency Services**

Following losses of over \$200,000, amounting to over 30% of its operating budget, the Department of Emergency Services had to cut 37 staff, severely hindering its ability to fulfill its duties. The department's ability to coordinate responses to emergencies and to deploy resources during a public health emergency has been severely hindered, leaving the department very

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<sup>47</sup> See *Buffalo News*: Gene Warner, "Justice System Cringing at Impact of Budget Cuts," Sec A1, March 7, 2005; Timothy Drury, "Lack of Probation Staff is Causing Havoc on Area," September 21, 2005.

<sup>48</sup> See *Buffalo News*: Deidre Williams, "Cuts Hit Those in Need," Sec A1, March 15, 2005; Mark Sommer and Jay Rey "Budget's Hidden Fallout," Sec A1 19 May 2005

<sup>49</sup> See *Buffalo News*: Deidre Williams, "Cuts Hit Those in Need," Sec A1, March 15, 2005; Deidre Williams, "Budget Cuts Heighten Risk for Victims of Domestic Abuse, Agency Leaders Say," Sec D6, March 8, 2005

<sup>50</sup> See *Buffalo News*: Deidre Williams, "Cuts Hit Those in Need," Sec A1, March 15, 2005; Deidre Williams, "Budget Cuts Heighten Risk for Victims of Domestic Abuse, Agency Leaders Say," Sec D6, March 8, 2005

<sup>51</sup> Gene Warner, *Buffalo News*, "Justice System Cringing at Impact of Budget Cuts," Sec A1, March 7, 2005.

uneasy, especially after witnessing how the inadequate response during and after Hurricane Katrina turned an emergency into a fatal catastrophe in New Orleans. Furthermore, the County Fire Instructors were among those laid off in the department, meaning that Erie County's volunteer fire companies can no longer receive county training nor can they practice in the county's live fire training facilities. This is a severe loss considering the 360 outdoor trainings conducted and the 5,400 volunteer firefighters trained in 2004.<sup>52</sup>

### **Sheriffs Division**

Buckling under more than \$6 million in cuts – 50% of its operating budget – the Erie County Sheriffs Division has been forced into layoffs and the elimination of certain services, while having to downscale others. The narcotics unit has been reduced from 19 staff to 2, practically eliminating its work. Meanwhile, traffic enforcement and use of the Division's helicopter has been greatly reduced. Furthermore, programs such as DARE have been eliminated. In response to these cuts, Major Michael Manning, Troop A Commander of the New York State Police predicted there would likely be more accidents and fatalities.<sup>53</sup>

### **County Layoffs**

An estimated 1,500 county employees have lost their jobs in the wake of the county budget crisis, eliminating more than 50 million income dollars that would have circulated into the WNY economy. Studies show that these layoffs will have an *economic multiplier effect* on our community, leading to the loss of an *additional* 1,500 jobs and 50 million dollars in income.<sup>54</sup> **Furthermore, many of these laid off county employees provided mandated state and federal services, and as such their salaries were covered mostly by state and federal grants, but their unemployment checks will be a county obligation, costing the county more in the short term.**

## **5. Recommendations for Moving Forward**

*In talking about moving beyond the Erie County budget crisis, one must put the crisis in its national context. Given the role tax cuts and resultant spending cuts on the federal level have played, it is impossible for our community to solve the crisis overnight. For that reason, the Erie County Community Coalition has broken up its recommendations into those that are long-term and those that are short-term.*

*The long-term recommendations tend to deal with national and state policy and would help Erie County operate on firmer ground. The short-term recommendations tend to be actions on the local level and some may not be the most politically desirable actions to take, but are, and will remain, necessary actions until national policy better services the needs of Erie County.*

*Given the global scope of the below recommendations, they are not simply recommendations for our Erie County elected officials, but for officials in all levels of government. While local mismanagement of Erie County government has played a key role in this budget crisis, one must not overlook mismanagement in Albany and Washington, DC.*

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<sup>52</sup> Mike Walters, "Full Impact on Erie County Department of Emergency Services Resulting from 2005 Budget Cuts", March 2005.

<sup>53</sup> See *Buffalo News*: Tom Ernst, "Central Police Services to Stay Intact; Sheriff's Unit Guttled," Sec. D3, April 1, 2005; Gene Warner, "Justice System Cringing at Impact of Budget Cuts," Sec. A1, March 7, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Personal interview with Susan Davis, Professor of Economics at Buffalo State College, conducted by Daniel Cross, September 2005

## LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Restore progressivity to federal taxation.** Since 1962, the level of federal revenue derived from the progressive income and corporate taxes has dropped from 63 percent to 52 percent, while the level derived from the regressive payroll tax has risen from 17 percent to 40 percent. Meanwhile, the top tax rates on dividends and estates have dropped by 79 percent and 31 percent respectively.<sup>55</sup> By restoring progressivity to the system of federal taxes, we will more equitably distribute the tax responsibility based on the ability to pay. Furthermore, lower income tax rates on the middle class and poor will increase their purchasing power, thus increasing sales tax revenues on the county and state level.
- **Reverse the tax shift from the federal level to the state and local level.** Between 2002 and 2004, federal tax cuts delivered \$197.3 billion in new tax breaks to the top 1 percent of Americans. These cuts dramatically increased the tax burden on the state and local level, leading state governments to close approximately \$200 billion in budget gaps by raising taxes and fees and by cutting services.<sup>56</sup> Because state and local taxes are more regressive than federal taxes, this tax shift has put a disproportionate strain on the middle class and poor. Restoring progressivity to our tax system needs to be coupled with a tax shift from the local and state levels back to the federal level, creating less of a reliance on regressive sales and property taxes on the local level.
- **Ensure federal funding for all vital community services.** The federal government mandates that local governments provide a host of services that are vital to the infrastructure and prosperity of their community. However, federal funding for these mandates has dropped drastically over the last several decades, shifting taxation to the state and local level. The federal government needs to redirect monies to these mandated services and other vital community programs, alleviating the burden from the local level.
- **Develop a national health system that is funded on a state or federal level.** This will increase the insurance pool, providing for more equitable payment for health care and the more equitable distribution of services. This will also alleviate Erie County of its costly Medicaid local share, relieve the business community of inordinate health care costs and guarantee universal health care from cradle to grave as in every other industrialized country. The litmus test for such a system is its efficiency, effectiveness, humaneness and transparency. As Rod Watson of the *Buffalo News* has written, "Take health care off the table by insuring coverage for everyone, and management and workers could find more productive things to argue about, like how to make better car parts, improve county services or educate kids."<sup>57</sup>
- **Reform the system of campaign finance at all governmental levels.** Only with true public financing will our elected officials be able to engage in honest public policy discussions with the community, and ensure that public money is used for the *public good*. By lessening the importance of large campaign contributions to candidates, elected officials could better serve all citizens.

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<sup>55</sup> Collins, pp. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Collins, pp. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Rod Watson, *Buffalo News*, "Solution for Health Care," August 18, 2005.

- **Regional policy makers, legislators and the community need to take a long-term view of our assets in order to maintain, protect and enhance them.** These assets include our access to fresh water, our waterfront, sustainable energy sources, infrastructures, education and our highly skilled and productive workforce.
- **Regional policy makers, legislators and the community need to work to develop a comprehensive understanding of economic development based on our regional assets.** High Road Economic Development leads to prosperity for the entire community, not just businesses that may take their profits out of our region.

### **SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **It is time for our elected county officials to be true leaders.** The only way to restore the public's trust in their officials is by reestablishing the checks and balances among the Executive and Legislative branches and county departments. County leaders, at all levels must be accountable to the community and to one another, which includes eliminating unnecessary pork and patronage. To encourage this accountability the community has a responsibility to be thoughtful and analytical of the serious fiscal dilemmas with which county officials are confronted.
- **Build on the "Erie County Budget Disclosure Act" and develop a system of transparency in county government,** allowing citizens to track expenditures, allocations, and discretionary spending, thus holding county officials and departments accountable.
- **Evaluate the array of studies that have been conducted on the functions of Erie County government to discover ways to minimize waste, enhance the provision of quality services and promote real economic development.** This should include county workers with expertise in their department's operations. Instead of protecting turf, county officials should prioritize ways to most efficiently and effectively utilize our tax dollars. Such an evaluation should identify ways to increase cooperation between departments and avoid duplication of services. An honest evaluation will highlight unneeded pork and patronage to be eliminated. This evaluation must also take into account the negative impacts of privatizing services, and must avoid the dangers of overburdening the non-profit sector.
- **Analyze the effects of the 2005 budget cuts on the provision of quality public services. Aim to restore vital services lost.** The budget cuts have had enormous human and financial costs on Erie County (see "Cuts Cost More" section). Many programs cut have traditionally provided both vital services and vital sources of revenue to Erie County. The restoration of these services is key in promoting the multiplier effect of real economic development.
- **Restore tax rates to those of comparable New York State counties.** It was a mistake to decrease the County's property tax revenue stream by 35 percent in 2000 and 2001. We must correct the mistake by restoring tax levels to those of comparable counties. At the same time, county officials and citizens need to advocate the tax reforms outlined in the "Long-term Recommendations" section. If we remain focused on federal and state tax policy as a primary cause of the budget crisis we will be working to alleviate the fiscal burden at the county level that is negatively impacting our quality of life.

- **Instead of promoting corporate welfare, promote *High Road Economic Development* as the key to economic productivity and sustainability as a region.** Its focus is to attract and develop businesses based on regional assets, infrastructure development and maintenance (ie. roads, public works, schools, libraries, arts and cultural institutions, and vital community services). The goal is a productive business community and citizenry, which then produce a healthy tax base. Tax revenues are then recycled back into the community's assets, infrastructure and services, cultivating further business growth while enhancing the quality of life. The cycle is continuous. With good jobs, good wages (living wages) and family friendly benefits the citizens then positively impact the local economy by participating in cultural activities, shopping locally, patronizing restaurants etc. This *economic multiplier effect* further augments tax revenues. In times of adversity the government can respond effectively and citizens and businesses can access proper services. High Road Economics is a positive alternative to the Supply Side/Trickle Down economics that has so disproportionately favored the wealthy and big business without benefiting the community.

## 6. CONCLUSION

**Hurricane Katrina provided the devastating reality of tax cuts, cronyism, ineffective leadership and a true disregard by government to represent *all* people.** Communities across this country are recognizing that given similar circumstances, they too, could easily face devastation with the same lack of leadership and dangerous fiscal policies that are dismantling vital programs and effective, responsive services. Our community infrastructure is a shell of what it once was.

**In order to rebuild a viable, sustainable economy for the future, the citizens of Erie County need to truly understand the role of county government and the practical outcomes of tax policy.** Instead of sound bites and ideological spins, our focus should be on pragmatic solutions, both short-term and long-term, that raise revenue through fairly levied taxes, to promote community well-being through strong community infrastructure: well-paying jobs with good benefits (public and private sector), safe neighborhoods, adequately funded schools, libraries and arts and cultural institutions, and a social safety net for the most vulnerable of our population. Our community, working together, needs to think about a diversified economy from agriculture to bio-informatics. To do this we need a strong public sector, so we must not cripple it through cuts. With the vision of the *public good*, we must give particular attention to cooperation and enhanced synergy.

Unfortunately it is always easier to destroy than it is to build. Building takes strength of character, creativity, flexibility and generosity. **As diverse communities, we must fully realize and respect our potential through our access to fresh water, our waterfront, sources of sustainable energy, educational institutions and a great workforce. A healthy government will be needed to achieve greatness, and we cannot have a healthy government without adequate revenue streams. By restoring the progressivity of our tax system and with the federal government's reinvestment in vital community services, we can build firmer ground on which Erie County can thrive.** In such an environment, our county leaders need to work toward High Road Economic Development, creating a prosperous community with an excellent quality of life.

Due to the current fiscal crisis in Erie County, we have much to accomplish. Present tax policy and spending trends on the federal and state levels have worsened Erie County's plight. **While**

**advocating for the proper reforms on the federal and state levels, our county officials need to make the best decisions – albeit difficult at times – to ensure we have sufficient revenue streams to pay for the services we all benefit from directly or indirectly through the economic multiplier effect. Real economic development depends upon it.** Our county leaders must hold one another accountable to the public good and ensure our tax dollars are spent wisely. Business must regain their stature of being good corporate citizens. As citizens, we must participate responsibly and thoughtfully in public discussion. By working together, we can realize the Erie County we have all been dreaming of.

## ***Erie County Community Coalition***

### **Mission and Vision:**

The *Erie County Community Coalition* envisions a county government, through which all sectors (residents, community organizations and faith based institutions, business and labor, and public officials) work together to provide for a thriving and sustainable economy, safe, just, and healthy communities, cultural enrichment for its citizens, and a social safety net for those in need. Our coalition strives to provide a voice for all Erie County residents as we work together to shape a public consensus on how our county government can be supported through fairly levied taxes, fees, and other revenues, how it can be operated efficiently, and how essential services can be maintained and equitably provided for all residents.

### **Participating and Advisory Organizations:**

African American Cultural Center  
Arts Council in Buffalo & Erie County  
Baptist Ministers Conference  
Buffalo AFL-CIO  
Catholic Charities  
Citizen Action  
Civil Service Employees Association  
Coalition for Economic Justice  
Coalition of Black Trade Unionists  
Cornell School of Industrial Labor Relations  
Creativity & Civic Solutions Commission  
Hispanics United of Buffalo  
Literacy Volunteers  
Network of Religious Communities  
Second Baptist Church  
Teamsters Local 264  
United Steelworkers District 4  
WNY AFL-CIO  
WNY Council On Occupational Safety & Health  
We Care Neighborhood Community Block Club