

Futures Academy: The Case for Maintaining its Magnet/Residence School Status

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Introduction

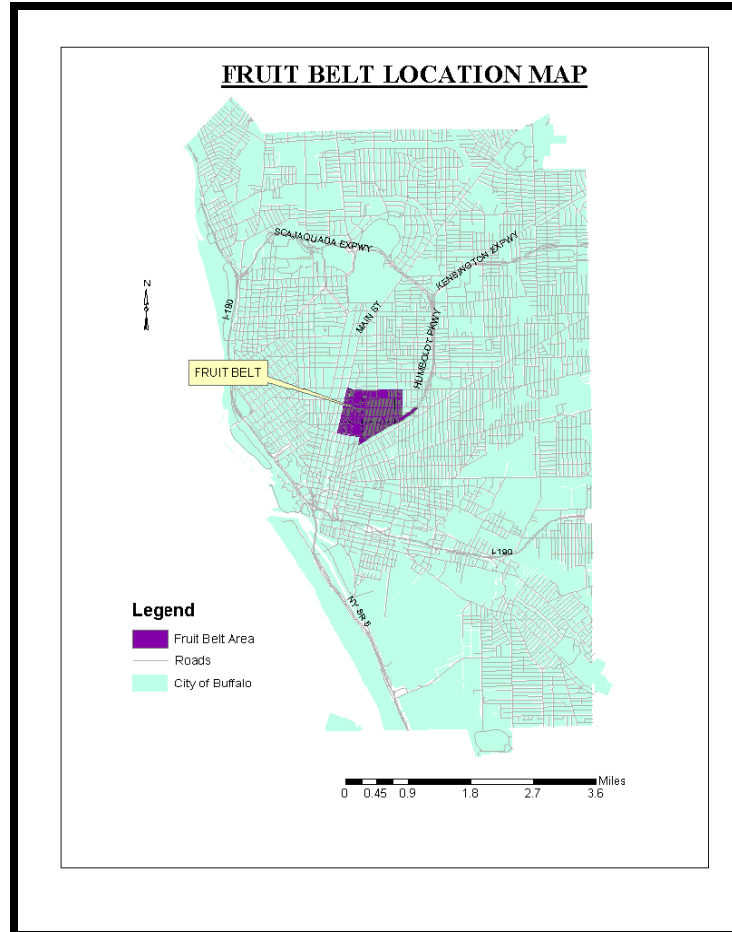
Futures Academy is a pre-K through Eighth Grade-magnet/residential school located in downtown's Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood (Figure 1). This community is the site of a massive, comprehensive redevelopment project sponsored by the City of Buffalo. The Fruit Belt/Medical Campus Planning and Community Development Initiative is not just another central city redevelopment project. Rather, it is a project designed to demonstrate how to finance, radically transform, and change distressed, underdevelopment neighborhoods into great places to live and work. The project's goal is to physically redevelop the neighborhood, set-up commercial activities that will service the community's resident and work population, economically stabilize the community by finding jobs for unemployed and underemployed residents, create a synergistic relationship between the resident community and the Medical Campus, and strengthen the social fabric by fostering a community spirit that is based on the principles of mutual trust and respect; collective work and responsibility, and commitment to participatory democracy and systemic neighborhood change. Once such a model of neighborhood finance and revitalization has been developed, it will be replicated in other distressed and underdeveloped Buffalo neighborhoods.

The overarching idea is to transform the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus into a stable mixed-class, mixed-race community that is one of the great places to live and work in Western New York. The continued development of Futures Academy, and the linking of the school's development to the neighborhood's development, is central to the success of this neighborhood revitalization project.

The University at Buffalo Center for Urban Studies was contracted by the City to develop a strategic plan to guide and finance the community's redevelopment. The Executive Summary of that strategic plan, along with the Executive Summary of the proposed Tax

Increment Finance District, which will be used to fund the effort, are found in the Appendix.

Figure 1: The Fruit Belt/Medical Campus in Citywide Context



The Fruit Belt/Medical Campus Neighborhood

The Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood is one of the poorest communities in Erie County. In 1990, the median household income was only \$8,740, which is almost \$10,000 lower than the citywide median household income, and \$20,000 lower than the County. About 50% of the population lives below the poverty line and a staggering 26% were unemployed in 1990. The labor force participation rate is well below the city and county rates, and these figures do not include those who have stopped looking for work altogether.

The neighborhood's physical environment reflects the community's low-income status. The housing stock is one of the oldest in Erie County, and its infrastructure is decaying and crumbling. Vacant lots are filled with rubbish and weeds, sidewalks are poorly maintained and most of the streets are in need of repair (Figure 2). The dilapidated

physical environment contains many unhealthy homes, which contributes to the health problems of the students and their parents. The point is that current conditions of life in the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus can negatively impact the academic achievement of neighborhood students attending Futures Academy. Thus, by rebuilding and developing the neighborhood, then, we also create conditions that will help bolster student academic achievement and accelerate the school's growth and development.

Figure 2: Dilapidated Housing in the Fruit Belt



Although a distressed, underdeveloped neighborhood, the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus nonetheless has great potential. Located in this community is the center of Western New York's health related industries, which is anchored by institutions such as Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Kaleida Health, and Hauptman-Woodward Medical Research Center, along with the Buffalo Medical Group, Buffalo General Hospital, Health Care Plan, and the Buffalo Speech and Hearing Center. Efforts are currently underway to further develop the Medical Campus and transform it into a world-class place that will attract millions in public and private investment.

The recent announcement of a BioInfomatics Center being located on the campus is one example of its anticipated development. So far, a total of 257.1 million has been committed to the project. In addition, 11 companies, including pharmaceutical giants Pfizer and Bristol-Myers Squibb, have joined as research partners. It is anticipated that development of the BioInfomatics Center will attract other companies to the area and spawn the development of new regional economy.¹

The strategy is to use development of the Medical Campus as a trigger that spawns development of the resident community. The raw materials exist for transforming the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus resident neighborhood into a great place to live and work. Joining this mixture of health related industries are neighboring retail establishments,

¹ **The Buffalo News**, March 17, 2002, p. A-1.

churches, a variety of community-based organizations, and most important, a magnet/neighborhood school.

Figure 3: The Medical Campus--Looking Southward on Michigan



The Fruit Belt/Medical Campus Neighborhood Redevelopment Strategy

The goal of the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus redevelopment project is to create a mixed-race, mixed-class neighborhood with clusters of new townhouses, condominiums, and rehabilitated single-family homes with landscaped streets and open space, commercial development, and other amenities that will make the neighborhood a great place to live, work, and raise a family. Anti-gentrification barriers are being built into the plan so that the sorting and sifting mechanisms of the urban land-rent market will not displace the existing low-to-moderate income families.

The plan is to retain the existing residents, while simultaneously attracting a broad mixture of new residents to the community. The new residents would primarily be younger workers from the Medical Campus and other downtown businesses who currently commute from the suburbs. At the same time, the idea is to also attract low-to-moderate and higher income medical campus workers to the neighborhood. By retaining the current residents and by attracting a significant number of new residents, the ideas envisaged in the redevelopment plan can be realized. The revitalized Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood would consist of singles, young married couples with no children, and families with younger children. These newcomers would be integrated into the existing neighborhood fabric, increasing the existing population by several thousand residents, including two to three hundred school-aged children. Over time, we expect the current resident population to increase by 2000 to 3000 new residents.

The key element in the development strategy is the belief that upwardly mobile and middle-class blacks, whites, Latinos, and Asians can be attracted to the community with a significant number of low-to-moderate income families. This belief is based on several factors. First, market studies show that downtown neighborhoods are attractive to young,

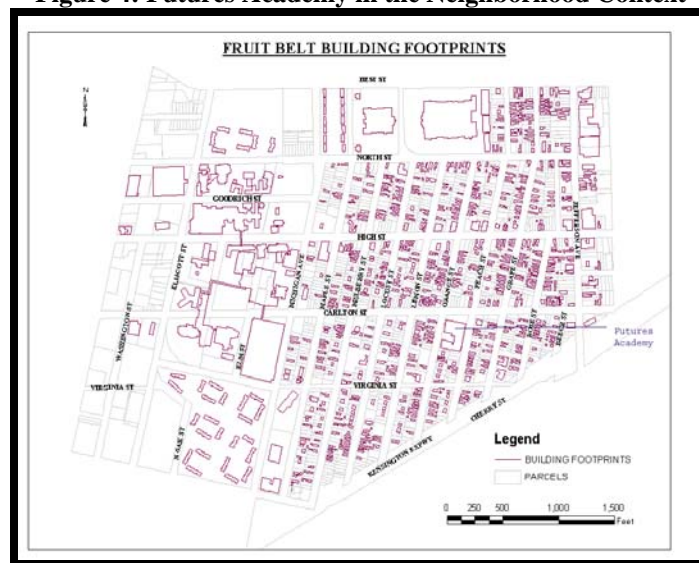
upwardly mobile residents, both empty nesters and those with young children. Second, the neighborhoods to the west of Main Street, near the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus, are a favored location for middle-class white and black residents, many with school age children. Lastly, there are about 10,000 Medical Campus workers who might be willing to live in the neighborhood. We plan to appeal to this group with the simple slogan, *If you lived in the Fruit Belt/Medical Corridor, You'd be home by now.*

To make the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood a competitive residential alternative in the market place, three things must happen:

1. A charming neighborhood with high quality housing must be developed.
2. The perception and reality of the neighborhood as a very safe place must be firmly established.
3. The neighborhood must have a strong public Pre K- Eighth Grade or high school.

This is where Futures Academy comes in. A key element of the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus redevelopment plan is use Futures Academy as part of the foundation on which the new neighborhood is built (Figure 4). Futures Academy will play three roles in the neighborhood development process. First, it will provide the community with a great school, which links schooling and education to the neighborhood development process. Second, as a quality school, Futures will be as a *magnet* that draws new residents to the community. Third, Futures, because it draws students from across the city, will serve as a de facto ambassador of goodwill for the neighborhood. When students and parents tell their friends and neighbors about this great school in a developing neighborhood with safe streets, a vibrant commercial district, and charming homes and townhouses, word of the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood gem will spread across the region, and both central city dwellers and suburbanites will think about it as a viable residential choice.

Figure 4: Futures Academy in the Neighborhood Context



Futures Academy and the Buffalo School District Choice Plan

The Buffalo Choice plan threatens the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood development strategy. According to the proposed plan, Futures Academy would lose its magnet/neighborhood status. Located at 295 Carlton Street, in the heart of the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus resident community, Futures Academy has been honored as a National School of Excellence and Title One Distinguished School. Its current academic program develops life skills through its academic inclusion program (Figure 4). The staff incorporates this theme into its curriculum and the magnet school component introduces students to various occupations through mini-courses for fourth through eighth graders. Additional programs are offered through the Liberty Partnership and Learn and Serve Programs, which take place both during and after school. The students are also involved in servicing their school and community.

Figure 4: Futures Academy



Futures Academy is a racially diverse school with a student population consisting of 38% white, 1% Hispanic, and 60% black. This profile closely mirrors the district wide enrollment, which is 29.50% white, 10.90% Hispanic and 56.80% black. The racial profile of the school is an important component of the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood development strategy. The project's goal is to build a mixed-race and mixed-income neighborhood. The existence in the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood of a race and class-integrated magnet school status will play a significant role in the neighborhood redevelopment process by attracting new residents to the community.

Under the proposed Buffalo School Choice Plan, Futures Academy's status will be changed from a magnet/resident school to a Zone 8 Theme school. If this happens, the school's viability will be threatened and its role in the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus

neighborhood development plan will be significantly altered. Under the Proposed Choice Plan, the school district will be divided into three geographic zones: A, B and C.

Currently, Futures Academy draws its students from across the city, but under the proposed Choice Plan, it will be placed in Zone B and have to recruit its students from that area. Students living outside Zone B would not be able to attend the school.² The proposed change in status would negatively impact Futures Academy in the following ways.

- 1. If Futures Academy loses its magnet school status, the school will be racially resegregated.** The School Choice Committee says they developed zones that were racially diverse. Yet, this is not the complete story. While the districts are racially diverse, the neighborhoods that comprise the districts are not. Buffalo is one of the most residentially segregated cities in the United States. Most blacks live on the East Side. South Buffalo is over eighty percent white, and North Buffalo is almost as segregated. The West Side is the most diverse part of the city, but even here, blacks, whites, and Latinos live in well-defined clusters, while the Native Americans are scattered.

Futures Academy is located on the eastern side of Main Street in Zone B, in a community that is over 90 percent African American. Currently, about 32 percent of the students attending Futures are white, and the great majority live in North and South Buffalo (Figure 5). Under the Choice Plan, these white students could no longer attend the school.

Whites do live in Zone B, but it is doubtful if many would attend Futures Academy. Most West Side whites are middle-class, and many send their children to private institutions. On the western side of Main Street, in Zone B, there are four elementary schools, one early childhood center, and one middle school. Given the number of neighborhood schools located on the western side of Main Street, most parents will opt to send their child to a school near their home.³ This might also explain why so few of the students bused to Futures come from the proposed Zone B. So, then, under the Choice Plan, Futures will probably draw most of its students from black neighborhoods on the eastern side of Main Street, and this would cause the school to be resegregation.

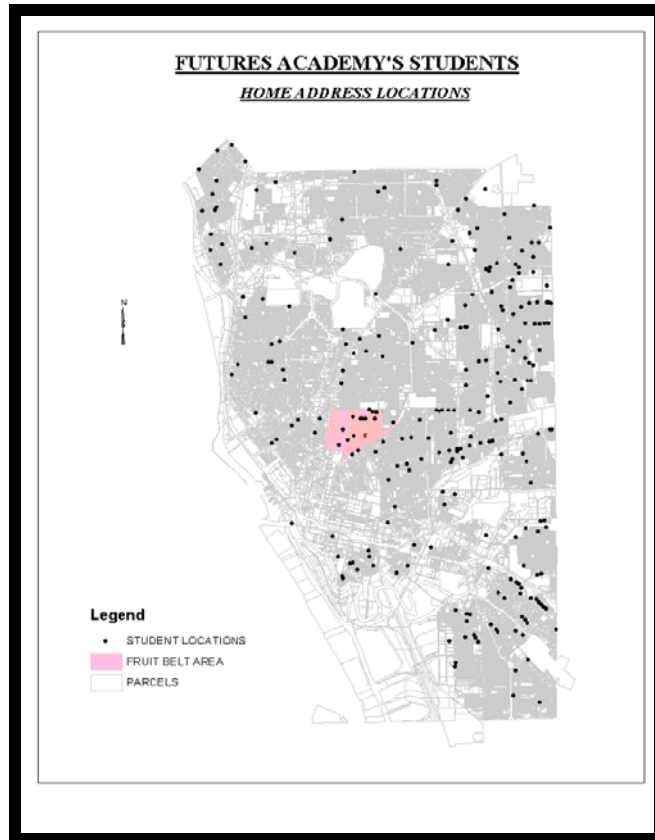
- 2. The resegregation of Futures Academy will hurt efforts to redevelop the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood.** The redevelopment plan calls for the building of a mixed-class, mixed-race neighborhood. Having a strong neighborhood school that is already integrated will help attract whites and Latinos

² According to the Choice Plan, students currently Futures will be able to complete their elementary education at that school. This, however, is not the critical issue. The point is that Futures will not be able to continue drawing its students from across the city and this will have a detrimental effect on the school's development.

³ See the Center for Urban Studies, *Redistricting Buffalo Public Schools: A GIS Application: A Report to the Buffalo School Board*, July 2001.

to the school. On the other hand, having a demagnetized school, which is being rapidly resegregated, will diminish the attractiveness of the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood to potential residents.

Figure 5: Neighborhoods Where Students at Futures Live



3. **A change in status of Futures Academy could lead to a drastic decline in enrollment.** Currently, 507 students, or about 70% of the student population, are bused to Futures from across the city (Figure 5). As the data shows, Futures Academy is a true magnet school that attracts students from every part of Buffalo. If it loses its magnet school status, Futures would no longer be able to recruit students citywide, it would have to recruit students only within Zone B. Futures will have to compete with thirteen other elementary schools for students, six theme schools and seven early childhood centers. This will be a daunting task. Given the cluster of schools on the western side of Main Street, students living in that part of Zone 8 will probably go to a school near their home.

In the Choice Plan, parents will have the option of sending their children either to an early childhood center or to a theme school. Parents who do not select an early childhood center will probably send their children to a theme school near their home, rather than one located in some distant neighborhood. At the same time,

parents who do select the early childhood option will probably send their children to a middle school, rather than a theme school.

- 4. Ms. Daniel has been the driving force behind the development of Futures but she will be retiring in June.** Her retirement, combined with a change in the school's status, may shake public confidence in its viability. If that happens, many parents may choose to send their children to a school with a more certain future, rather than take a chance on Futures Academy in the post-Daniel era. Thus, selection of Ms. Daniel's successor is a significant issue. In order to maintain the existing momentum at Futures and encourage parents to continue their support for the school, the successor should be an experienced principal who believes in the magnet program and who understands the importance of linking the development of Futures Academy to the development of the surrounding neighborhood.

These four points suggests that a shift in the status of Futures Academy from a magnet/residential school to a Zone B Theme school will have a detrimental effect on its viability and make the revitalization of the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood a more complex and challenging task.

Maintaining the Current Status of Futures Academy: An Alternative Scenario to the Zone B Theme Plan

As previously mentioned, one of the keys to successfully rebuilding the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood is to develop a strong Pre-K through Eighth Grade school in the community. The first step is for Futures Academy to remain a magnet/residential school. One goal of the partnership between the Center for Urban Studies and Futures Academy is to demonstrate that educational outcomes of students at the school can be bolstered through the process of (1) linking the school—principals, teachers, students, and parents—to the neighborhood revitalization process through programs and activities, (2) bringing new resources into the school and (3) stabilizing and making the neighborhood a great place to live and work.

Toward this end, the Center for Urban Studies and Futures Academy believe their partnership can strengthen the school's curriculum and bring new resources to the school. For example, the Graduate School of Education has developed proposals that will bring three innovative programs to Futures. *City Voices, City Visions: The Futures Academy Partnership for Multimedia Community Inquiry* offers an innovative cultural journalism approach to integrating information and multimedia technology into teaching and learning, an approach that has proven a successful academic strategy to engage struggling learners to meet academic standards. *I Remember Home* will involve students in the construction of the neighborhood's history, the history of neighbors and kin, and the history of the student as situated in a formerly vibrant and historically central community space. A third project will show students how to learn language arts, math, and science through multi-cultural movement and music. We are seeking funding for these projects.

Also, Citibank has expressed interest in developing a partnership with Futures Academy, and we hope to solidify this relationship during the spring 2002. Additionally, we are working with the school on a project to turn the block fronting Futures into a community garden. We are working with a group of eighth graders on the neighborhood planning process in the Fruit Belt/Medical campus. Their input on how to build and develop the community is being solicited.

In sum, Futures is being positioned to become an even more successful school. A change in school's status will threaten the momentum that has been established. Therefore, it is requested that the status of Futures Academy as a magnet/residential school not be changed.

Conclusion

Futures Academy should be retained as a magnet/residential school. The retention of the school's current status is one of the keys to successfully rebuilding the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood. A strong pre-K through Eighth Grade elementary magnet/residential school is central to attracting new residents to the community. Such a school would give the community citywide visibility and be a powerful force in making the community competitive in the residential market place.