

Duane Diggs, Cathy Lee and Maxine Murphy: Let public help decide spending of stimulus dollars

By Duane Diggs, Cathy Lee and Maxine Murphy

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The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, known as stimulus funding, is legislation created by the Obama administration. Its purpose is to create jobs, boost our economy and shield it from deepening recession.

There are as many supporters as detractors of this legislation. However, with hundreds of billions in public investments and an unclear visible impact, many people are left feeling hollow despite avoiding another Great Depression.

This is widely held as the consensus of mainstream economists. Our question: Where is the accountability?

Taxpayers funded the recovery act with \$862 billion. Cash allocated by Congress is being distributed throughout the 50 states for funding of transportation, industry, child care and aid to many economic sectors. Since stimulus dollars began arriving in distribution to the states, the public has been at the mercy of regional state governments in determining where, when and how funds are spent. When the funds are allocated to local municipalities, local officials have control over how they are being used, leaving out community input from the ongoing process.

PUSH Buffalo has certified energy efficiency workers ready to go to work. With more than \$8 million in stimulus-related Weatherization Assistance Program funding for the city of Buffalo, the program has created nearly zero jobs.

Members of NOAH have worked with already-established training through BOCES and the Housing Authority. Local workers are trained and ready to work when the projects created by stimulus money are ready to hire. NOAH organized elected officials to agree to hire from this "Ready to Work List." Releasing stimulus money equals new projects and jobs.

VOICE-Buffalo organized the release of stimulus funding in Erie County for day care. We pressured local government, from the governor's office to the Erie County executive's office, to stop adding to the unemployment rolls. This effort resulted in \$1.7 million invested in day care to keep families working.

On July 23, The News reported that \$65 million in local stimulus money was not yet spent. It is time to re-examine how the remaining funds can be used for the desired positive impact. It is citizens' responsibility to hold public officials accountable with community organizations as we organize our community, and determine the processes of how the remaining stimulus funds are spent.

The New York Stimulus Alliance is holding town hall meetings to debate the spending of these stimulus dollars. The public must know what is truly happening within the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. It is time for the voices of the community to be heard on this most important issue.

Duane Diggs represents VOICE-Buffalo, Cathy Lee belongs to NOAH(Niagara Organizing Alliance for Hope) and Maxine Murphy is from PUSH (People United for Sustainable Housing).