Thanks to Professor Mildred Warner and her graduate students, Rod Howe, and colleagues, for this outstanding example of the university’s land grant mission in action, improving lives and communities right here in upstate New York, as it does around the world.

I am particularly honored to be here today, to learn from this research on local government and to participate on this panel along with distinguished public officials.

Let me say at the outset that I have neither the expertise nor the authority of my fellow panelists. I’m speaking today with the voice of a citizen, with a perspective through the eyes of an active resident of Buffalo, to reflect on these findings and report highlights of progress and problems in Buffalo. The only advantage I have in this company is that of age, which means that mine is a long view of fiscal challenges and opportunities in Buffalo.

When I first saw the program title, “creative responses to fiscal stress,” I wondered, is this like “necessity is the mother of invention”? Then I was reminded that Alfred North Whitehead called that “a silly proverb,” saying, “necessity is the mother of futile dodges’ is much nearer the truth.”

The fiscal crisis can be seen as New York State dodging its financial responsibility to local governments for years. When I shared this observation with a friend who is the attorney for Buffalo’s control board, he said, “The fiscal control board was a dodge by the legislature too.”

The creative re-invention of Greater Buffalo, which is now in full swing, both predates this fiscal crisis and would have happened without it. In fact, when we look back to the most innovative local government developments, more came when resources were not so scarce.

A native Kansan, I’ve lived in Buffalo since 1970 and I’ve never seen more hopeful days—not saying better days, but the most optimistic days—the sense that we’re on an upward trajectory as opposed to trapped in a big snowball slowly rolling down a rust-strewn hill.
Why this optimism and energy?

First, we’re experiencing “the great inversion,” a return to cities and city life. The city of Buffalo is a place of extraordinary assets, many available, abandoned and undervalued. Developers are reclaiming and rebuilding historic structures. The university is reversing its historic mistake, building its medical school downtown within the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus. Neighborhoods are being rebuilt, historic neighborhoods where union halls and ethnic cultural centers provided mutual aid and a real sense of community. Those kinds of neighborhoods are not lost to the collective memory of Buffalo residents and the next generation is rebuilding them block by block, this time green zone by green zone, where the term grassroots really applies even in community gardens. New refugees and immigrants bring the next wave of entrepreneurial drive and cultural richness. Two weeks ago we were proud to rank number one in the nation on Forbes’ list of affordable cities.

Second, let me assure you as a Buffalonian, we are not ungrateful for what the state HAS done. The Regional Economic Development Council created a splendid opportunity for much more diverse and representative input into regional economic development decisions. With vision and focus, the REDC has resurrected a regional approach missing since the Erie and Niagara County Planning Board disappeared in an earlier fiscal crisis. They adopted smart growth criteria for investment. Governor Cuomo’s commitment to the Buffalo Billion is paying off with real investment in sites and companies with promise to create the jobs of the future, from molecular research to advanced solar power. Human capital has not been forgotten as workforce development for industries of the future is a component of the REDC initiatives. That public investment gives leverage for private investment which will be needed to rebuild the tax base lost to deindustrialization and population loss.¹

Third, there is growing public awareness that public investment is OUR tax money and it should not just be given away. The residents of Buffalo literally demanded a new waterfront development strategy to replace a decade-long closed door plan to subsidize a giant Bass Pro store on the Erie Canal Harbor. The citizenry demanded public access and public use, a voice in what their waterfront would be. They fought for a “lighter, quicker, cheaper” development approach with opportunities for local creativity and entrepreneurialism. They mobilized for community benefit agreements with the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation for Canalside and with the City of Buffalo for HarborCenter. And although there are still six separate IDAs in Erie County competing to give away tax dollars, “accountable economic development” is no longer an abstraction in public discourse.

¹This fact raises questions about the future impact of Start-Up NY, especially since losses to the property tax base over the decades were greater for Industrial and commercial property than for residential property.
Fourth, as private businesses left and government stumbled along or, more charitably, operated through tough times, the social economy, nonprofit organizations, took on greater importance in Buffalo’s revitalization. That is an arena of local commitment where “responses to fiscal stress” have been particularly innovative, and I was invited today to tell you a little about it for illustration.

The Partnership for the Public Good was founded in 2007 and has grown to now 158 partner organizations in Greater Buffalo. Operating on a strong collaborative model, it is a community-based think and do tank that conducts economic and policy research, holds public forums and hosts a weekly radio show, and democratically adopts an annual community agenda that sets local policy priorities. PPG has been supported by Cornell ILR School and we jointly sponsor High Road Summer Fellowships, now recruiting ILR undergraduates for its sixth year of applied research and service learning projects. Sixty-seven students have completed the program to date and we expect another 20 this summer.

PUSH Buffalo stands for People United for Sustainable Housing. It is a housing-based neighborhood organization on Buffalo’s west side that has won international awards for urban development. PUSH is reclaiming distressed neighborhoods by empowering residents, rehabilitating housing stock, fostering enterprise development and training young people for green jobs.

The Coalition for Economic Justice is a union and community-based organization that has been fighting for quality jobs, workers’ rights, living wages and accountable development practices since 1986. It is the Buffalo affiliate of Jobs with Justice. VOICE-Buffalo is a faith-based organization that organizes through congregations for social and economic justice issues.

The story is that in December 2012 these four organizations each received an invitation from George Soros’ Open Society Foundations to apply cooperatively for a $100,000 planning grant to advance equality and improve local democracy. One of 16 metro areas invited to apply, the Open Buffalo collaborative was one of eight awarded the planning grant in April 2013. We launched into a summer of Open Buffalo public events and expansive planning. Then, OSF announced in January of this year that Buffalo was one of only three winning sites to receive $1 million per year for two years, renewable for a decade, to strengthen civic infrastructure and improve local government locally, arguably where the most important change is taking place.

Open Buffalo’s winning plan focuses on three issues: (1) restorative justice to divert young people off the pathway from poverty to prison and to reduce racial disparities through programs in schools and courts; (2) worker equity to reduce the number of people working full time and still living in poverty—right now over 120,000 in poverty-wage jobs in WNY; and (3) high road economic development to assure that public investment guarantees a widely shared social and economic return.
Our plan has four implementation mechanisms: (1) grassroots leadership development to mobilize and prepare significant numbers of residents, more racially and socially representative residents, for positions of power; (2) mobile democracy centers (modeled on popular food trucks) to take civic education and engagement opportunities into diverse neighborhoods; (3) an innovation lab to create new local policies and supply relevant research for reform; and (4) an arts network to inspire creativity, advance understanding and justice, and unify Buffalo through its rich and varied cultures.

Our challenges are substantial but our hopes are high. Like the important research papers presented here today, we are set in the historical context of long-term industrial and population decline that these four great cities share. Just as surely, the innovations we are talking about today reflect a common streak of social, cultural and industrial ingenuity.

New York upstate cities are not basket cases—probably not in need of unshackling from much more than the weight of urban neglect. They are the places where we perpetually recreate our democracy—as we often repeat “with liberty and justice for all”—at the local level, where we can ALL make a difference.

LJF