



Is Bills defensive line due for a shakeup?

After getting pushed around by Bengals, the need is glaring | PAGE C1

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Problems mount for Fruit Belt food co-op as IRS acts

Nonprofit status was removed

By MARK SOMMER
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Gov. Kathy Hochul announced a \$3 million grant last June to help the African Heritage Food Co-op open a grocery store in the Fruit Belt, unaware the status of the group's nonprofit arm was revoked more than three weeks earlier.

Support for the co-op – in a part of Buffalo with limited access to affordable, healthy food – was part of a \$50 million East Side aid package Hochul delivered weeks after the May 14 Tops massacre.

The nonprofit status was removed on May 15 because the African Heritage Economic Initiative failed to file mandatory IRS forms three years in a row that provide an accounting of a nonprofit's governance and financial activities. The IRS didn't post the revocation until Aug. 8.

State officials said they didn't find out until they began their own review last fall.

"No funds will be disbursed until the project receives board approval and ESD completes its regular systematic review," Empire State Development spokeswoman Laura Magee told The Buffalo News.

Alexander Wright, co-op

founder and president, said he learned about the problem after the state announced its grant and is working to correct it.

While Wright appeals to the IRS for reinstatement, activists who have worked with him in Niagara Falls and Buffalo question his ability to complete the Fruit Belt redevelopment project, including Lorna Peterson, who bought and donated the building that the \$3 million in state money is earmarked to transform.

"He's had a lot of support and good will, but he needs to be held accountable," Peterson said.

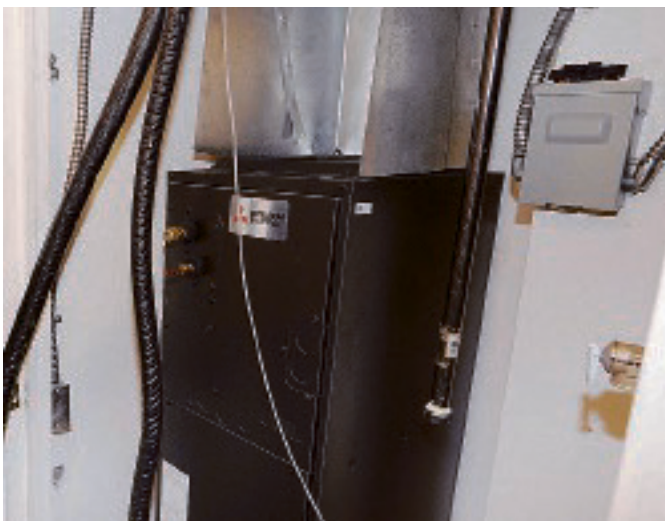
Wright blamed the IRS reporting oversight on a volunteer he entrusted with the task, who he said failed to follow through. He declined to name the volunteer but said the proper forms were filed the month after he learned the nonprofit status was revoked.

"That's on me for not staying on the individual, and then going back to check to make sure that what they were saying was being done was being done," said Wright, who is required to sign off on the annual tax-status forms.

Wright initially answered questions from The News before directing all further inquiries to Rich Azzopardi, a former adviser and spokesman

See **Nonprofit** on Page A6

Farewell, gas stove? Not quite, but state's climate plan is hefty



Photos by Derek Gee/Buffalo News; heat pump photo by Associated Press

Ever since Gov. Kathy Hochul rolled out New York's strategy to reduce emissions, speculation and rumor has run rife. With only five days until the April 1 budget deadline, lawmakers are racing to find a compromise.

Proposals would impact economy and daily life

By CAITLIN DEWEY
AND MATT GLYNN
NEWS STAFF REPORTERS

Gov. Kathy Hochul's ambitious plans to transition the state economy from fossil fuels to electricity have divided New Yorkers, spurred misinformation – and set up major budget battles in the state Senate and Assembly.

Hochul wants to phase out fossil fuel use in existing homes, for instance. The Legislature rejected those plans.

The Senate, meanwhile, wants big polluters to help fund New York's transition to clean energy. Neither the Assembly nor the governor endorsed that plan.

With only five days until the April 1 budget deadline, lawmakers are racing

to find a compromise on these and other climate issues – all while utility companies and interest groups bombard their constituents with a cacophony of contradicting, and sometimes misleading, information.

The debate also comes on the heels of a United Nations report that warned the world will blow past its emissions targets if industrialized nations like the United States do not slash them in half by 2030.

One thing all parties agree on: The outcome of these budget battles will fundamentally change both the state economy and daily life for millions of New York residents.

"We want people to be aware, and we want people to speak out if they're concerned," said Donna DeCarolis, president of National Fuel's utility business. "And I think they are."

Here is how each of the possible

plans would affect your household.

Phasing out natural gas

Perhaps no other issue has concerned New Yorkers as much as Hochul's so-called "natural gas ban," which would prohibit the sale of new gas- and oil-powered appliances starting in 2030. After that point, homeowners would have to install an electric heating system, like a heat pump, when their existing equipment breaks. The proposal does not apply to gas stoves, which homeowners with existing gas lines could use indefinitely.

But the Senate and Assembly in their respective bills omitted plans for phasing out natural gas in existing homes, which David Bauer, the CEO of National Fuel, called "encouraging" and "an optimistic sign." The removal

See **Climate** on Page A7



WNY WOMEN'S MARCH STEPS UP

"When men make war, we suffer the consequences," said Deidra EmEl, executive director of the WNY Peace Center. *Story on Page B1*

Disputes old and new define relationship of Hochul and tribes

By JAY ROOT
NEW YORK TIMES

MONTAUK — New York's Native American tribes fought bitterly with former Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo over his efforts to tax their tobacco sales and seize a sizable share of their gambling proceeds, and they blamed him for the deterioration of a stretch of interstate that slices through tribal lands.

So when Cuomo resigned in disgrace in 2021, tribal leaders found reason to hope for more amiable relations with his successor, Kathy Hochul, who was born and raised in western New York, not far from the state's largest reservation. A less prickly chief executive held out promise for greater accommodation.

Instead, the tensions between the tribes and the governor's office have increased, with Hochul taking a series of actions that have left the tribal and state leaders as far apart as ever.

While seeking to finance a new stadium for the billionaire owners of the Buffalo Bills, Hochul, in her words, "started playing hardball" with the Seneca Nation by freezing its bank accounts until it handed over more than \$500 million in gambling revenues. The tribe contends it never owed the money, although federal courts have backed the state's demands.

She also nixed legislation that would have granted long-sought recognition to Long Is-

See **Tribes** on Page A6

Bail, the billionaire and budget: Albany's priorities shake out as fiscal deadline nears

By CHRIS BRAGG
ALBANY BUREAU CHIEF

ALBANY — Ahead of the April 1 state budget deadline, Gov. Kathy Hochul has set out a top negotiating priority. At a press conference last Wednesday, Hochul stated that, "Protecting New Yorkers is my No. 1 priority. Full stop."

After Republicans effectively stressed rising crime during the 2022 governor's race, Hochul is trying to push

through another revision to the state's bail laws, amid heavy pushback from Democrats who control the State Senate and Assembly.

At the same time, Hochul's agenda has gotten a boost from an unlikely source. The New York Times reported this week that former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire founder of Bloomberg L.P., has donated \$5 million to help fund an issue-oriented nonprofit

group, American Opportunity, that is promoting Hochul's agenda as she faces opposition on numerous fronts from the Legislature.

In her remarks Wednesday, Hochul said she supported the premise of the 2019 law eliminating cash bail for most misdemeanor and nonviolent felony charges: That financial means should not dictate whether a person is released from jail to await trial.

"But since the bail laws

were passed in 2019, there's been a number of revisions," she said. "That's not a sign of the original bill's failure. It's a sign of our collective commitment to get it right."

Hochul is trying to change a provision of the 2019 law requiring judges to use the "least restrictive" means to ensure a defendant returns to court. She said that would avoid confusion with oth-

See **Budget** on Page A7

INDEX

Ask Amy B5
City & Region B1
Classified B6

Comics B5
Crossword B7
Horoscope B5

Lotteries B2
News in Brief B3
Obituaries B4

Opinion A8
Scoreboard C7
Sports C1



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Details on Page B8



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