

Grins and groans

THE ISSUE | Grins and groans from news of the week.

OUR OPINION | Grin to transparent budget discussions. Groan to continuing resolutions.

Grin

The Horseheads school board is doing its due diligence when it comes to the 2011-12 budget.

When the school board saw a presentation from Superintendent Ralph Marino Jr. illustrating the consequences of keeping the tax levy increase to 7.5 percent or less, members asked for more time to weigh the consequences of their actions.

On the one hand is cutting dozens of positions and both educational and extra-curricular activities.

On the other hand is a tax increase the public has already said it doesn't want in a survey the district had on its web site for a month.

It's a classic damned if you do, damned if you don't situation.

Given the choices, who can blame the board for taking as much time as possible. The results of the on-line survey aren't much help, either.

As board president Brian Lynch pointed out, people who filled out the survey might have liked keeping taxes low in the abstract. When they see what low taxes mean in terms of programs, however, they might have a change of heart.

That's why its so important residents take advantage of the two meetings the board will have before adopting a final budget proposal.

Now more than ever the board needs guidance from district residents.

Groan

Apparently U.S. Rep. Tom Reed, R-Corning, hates Big Bird.

Reed joined other House Republicans last week in voting to remove all federal funding from the Public Broadcasting System.

Honestly it's hard to know whether this is a good spending cut or not.

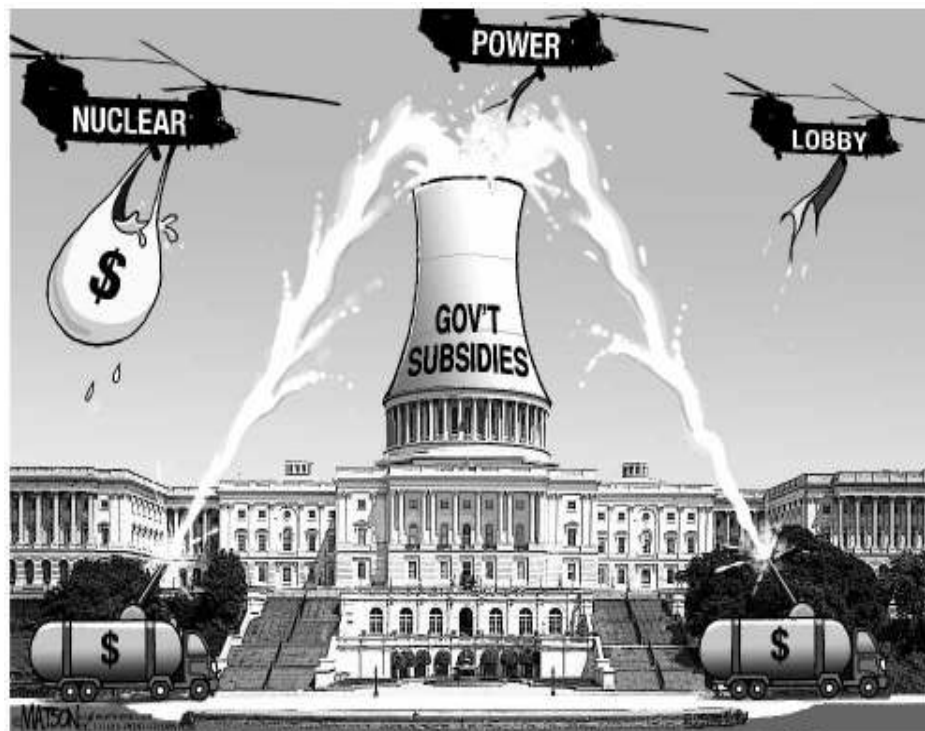
Rather than working on a budget for the remainder of the fiscal year, Congress has taken the easy way out, passing continuing resolutions to keep the government running two and three weeks at a time.

Accompanying these continuing resolutions are small spending cuts of \$6 billion and \$4 billion. Republicans are also cutting things like NPR in largely symbolic votes.

But how are taxpayers supposed to tell which cuts they support and which cuts they don't if they can't look at the cuts as a whole?

Funding for NPR seems like a noble cause, but so do many of the programs being targeted for spending cuts. Only when the cuts are actually taken as a whole can voters weigh their value.

ARTIST'S VIEW



DESPERATE ATTEMPTS TO AVERT A TOTAL MELTDOWN



COMMENTARY | STATE SEN. TOM O'MARA

Albany in need of sunshine

We spent the past week celebrating what's known as "Sunshine Week" throughout America, a nationally recognized initiative to promote the importance of open government and freedom of information.

So it was great timing, in my view, that we also welcomed the return to this year's budget adoption cycle of what's known as the "joint budget conference committee process." It's a process that's long been a favorite of many good government advocates, consistent with their goals to increase the public's understanding and awareness of budget and public-finance related matters.

It's worth recalling that last year at this very same time, in fact during Sunshine Week itself, editorial boards across New York were highly critical of what was occurring in state government – namely, a closed budget adoption process. Numerous newspapers were critical that budget negotiations were being carried out behind closed doors, in secret, by then-Gov. David Paterson and the Legislature's Democratic leaders.

The actions of these leaders, many editorial writers noted, violated the intention of a 2007 budget reform law. One local editorial put it this way, "So the latest incarnation of Albany's three men in a room doesn't want to discuss the 2009-10 state budget in public. That's the word that filtered out of

Albany last week.

Instead, Gov. David Paterson, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Senate Majority Leader Malcolm Smith may try to forgo public conference committees and do the dirty work behind closed doors, a near violation of a 2007 law passed by the state Legislature to allow for more open government in Albany." That's exactly what took place.

So last week we saw the return of conference committees. They'll continue this week. Few would go as far as to say it's the be-all and end-all of successful state budgeting, but it does facilitate openness and public scrutiny. Overall, 10 individual committees have been convened. Each committee is made up of 10 senators and assembly members, on a bipartisan basis, and meets in public. The conference committee process sets the stage for final budget negotiations between the Legislature and Gov. Andrew Cuomo leading up to the start of New York's new fiscal year on April 1.

We've already seen several committees move quickly to close key legislative agreements. For example, I serve as a member on the Transportation Conference Committee. It's a critical area that has a particular impact on the direction and quality of New York's short- and long-term strategies for job creation and economic development. Our committee reached one of the first legislative agreements with Gov.

Cuomo's proposal to maintain state funding for the Consolidated Highway Improvement Program (CHIPS), which provides the bulk of state aid to localities for the maintenance and improvement of local roads and bridges, at last year's statewide level of \$363.1 million.

But conference committees can also bring to light outstanding controversies – in short, they serve to pinpoint the differences that can make or break agreement on a final budget. For example, last week's committees brought forth important public discussions and debates in the areas of health care, the state prison system, education, oversight of state authorities, and many others. Many of these debates will continue this week and you can view them, daily, through the following Senate website: http://www.nysenate.gov/live_today

So I personally welcome the restoration of the conference committee process. There was a lack of public scrutiny during state budget negotiations over the past two years, and it helped produce bad, unsustainable tax-and-spend budgets. Conference committees should be part of every budget adoption – especially this year when we're facing so many deep-rooted and substantive changes.

■ **State Sen. Tom O'Mara, R-Big Flats, represents the 53rd Senate District.**

Insider responds to online poll

The question in *The Leader's* online poll last week was particularly appropriate: What should the U.S. do with its nuclear power program?

The choices were "full speed ahead", "dismantle it" or "slow down and take a look at the safeguards."

If *The Insider* would cast a vote, he'd opt for the third choice.

In my heart of hearts, I'd love to see the plug pulled on all of our nuclear power plants and every similar operation in the rest of the world.

We have spent days listening to hourly

reports of the ghastly situation in Japan in which the failure of a nuclear plant has totally

overshadowed a tsunami and a giant earthquake.

And yes, it's appropriate that the meltdowns at Fukushima have dominated the headlines.

There is far more danger at the nuclear plant than was posed by the twin natural disasters because radiation is something that can linger far longer.

You can clean up after a quake or a tsunami but an area exposed to huge levels of radiation may be unusable for centuries.

That's why I'd like to see all existing plants shut down forever.

That, however, is something that is not about to happen.

The world is too short of energy sources to totally ban any one. And modern facilities are probably far safer than the 40-year-old facility in northern Japan.

So it's onward, if not upward, with nuclear power – at least for the present.

However, new plants should be activated only under the most dire circumstances. And when existing facilities exceed their life expectancy, they should be allowed to fade into history.

We must do far more with other power sources such as solar energy and even wind generation.

I could put on earmuffs and be able to ignore the racket produced by giant wind turbines but at least that annoyance is not spreading radiation.

Residents of the Hornby Road in the Town of Corning are experiencing major problems as the result of a water district construction project.

When the job was started, the town figured it would cost \$65,600. And each of the 43 properties in the district would pay the town approximately \$41 a month to get city water. That was then.

Now the cost stands at \$96,726. And town officials say they can't compute the cost to the average citizen. One customer alone is paying \$170 per quarter and anticipates the cost will continue to increase.

Worse, the residents say the contractors did a bad job when they laid the pipe, leaving many yards in ruin.

The Town of Corning has been facing horrendous accounting problems in recent months and now the state comptroller is auditing the public books.

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OTHER VIEW | LOS ANGELES TIMES

Familiar terrain in Afghanistan war

Testifying before two congressional committees this week, Army Gen. David H. Petraeus offered a familiar assessment of the war in Afghanistan: Progress has been made in the effort to defeat the Taliban, but the gains are tentative and can be undone.

Petraeus' comments also cast doubt on the size of the partial withdrawal promised for July, and suggested that U.S. forces will remain in Afghanistan at significant levels until the NATO-set deadline of 2014, and perhaps beyond. It's a disquieting prospect for those of us who question

whether the war is winnable even with another three years of combat, assassinations and nation-building.

In an appearance before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Petraeus, who serves as the head of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, pointed to accomplishments that, in isolation, would seem to suggest that the war is proceeding successfully enough to justify a significant withdrawal of U.S. forces in July. They included "precise intelligence-driven operations to capture and kill insurgent leaders," the growth and increased professionalism of the Afghan armed forces and

the fact that "key insurgent safe havens have been taken away from the Taliban."

The problem is that Petraeus also said that the gains were "fragile and reversible." Other analysts have an even less sanguine view. They point to the fact that the Taliban still holds sway over much of the Afghan population and territory and remains a significant political and military force despite the nearly 10-year-old war. Nor has there been adequate progress on another front: reform of the corrupt regime led by President Hamid Karzai. And Pakistan remains a haven for terrorists.

For all the accomplishments Petraeus pointed to, the war is far from being won after almost a decade of U.S. involvement. Yet the Obama administration and its NATO partners seem committed to maintaining significant ground forces until and perhaps even after 2014. Meanwhile, the initial withdrawal, scheduled for July, looks increasingly likely to be a token operation, even if it includes some combat troops.

We would like to think that the gains Petraeus talked about can be sustained. No one wants to see the United States squander the investment it has

made in lives and resources. Perhaps staying the course for another three years will result in the achievement of everything the United States has sought in Afghanistan: the routing of the Taliban, al-Qaida and other terrorists; an honest and credible government in Kabul; a professional Afghan army, and a lasting improvement in the lives of ordinary people, including women.

We'd like to believe that's possible, but we're haunted by the image of another general warning in three years that recent gains in Afghanistan were "fragile and reversible."