

Grins and groans

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

OUR OPINION | Groan to a governor who is picking the wrong fight. Grin to accepting the inevitable.

Groan

In his attempt to justify massive cuts to education aid, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has chosen to pick a fight with school districts.



The latest salvo in that fight came when he suggested that administrative salaries should be capped based on enrollment.

There are a number of reasons why this is wrong-headed.

First of all, changing the rules under which superintendents operate is unfair.

While most superintendents didn't choose their profession to get rich, they did make their career decision expecting to earn a certain income level.

Telling a superintendent half way through his or her career the only way to make more money is to move to a bigger school district would be unfair.

Speaking of bigger school districts, Cuomo's proposal would also make it even more difficult for smaller school districts like Bradford to find and keep good administrators.

Many administrators already look at smaller school districts as a mere stepping stone in their career path. Telling them their salary is capped if they stay in a small school district almost guarantees that smaller school districts will be stuck hiring temporary administrators or, worse yet, administrators other districts don't want.

Cuomo is also wrong because he's sticking his nose in an area that's best left to local control.

What if a school district has what they consider to be a very special superintendent? In order to keep other school districts from poaching their superintendent, the school board decides to make it worth the administrators' while to stay in the district.

Isn't that a decision best left to the elected representatives of the district?

Superintendents in this area have shown they want to be part of the solution. In the past they've taken pay freezes and even given back some of their benefits in order to keep taxes low.

Cuomo should take advantage of their expertise instead of making them out to be the enemies of fiscal sanity.

Grin

Okay, Mother Nature, you've won.

You've teased us with mild temperatures time after time this winter, only to remind us again and again that you call the shots.



There's no reason to fight the inevitable. It's time to accept the fact that this is the new normal.

Mammoths will soon be roaming down Market Street.

We've entered a new Ice Age and should bow down to our snowy overlord.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
THE LEADER
PO BOX 1017
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Fax your letter to:

Attn: Joe Dunning
(607) 936-9939

E-mail your letter to:
jdunning@the-leader.com

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ARTIST'S VIEW



POLITICS | STATE SEN. TOM O'MARA

Partnership redefined

I predicted earlier this year that the current legislative session would provoke strong reactions. Any time you start wading into the kinds of fundamental changes being considered in Albany at the moment, it's just not going to sit well with everyone.

Among all the changes being thrown into the mix early on, none may have more of an impact on the future of local communities and local taxpayers than the one commonly called "mandate relief." It's without question the one that's become the call to arms among local leaders across the state, and it could turn out to be the crossroads that determines the success of the 2011 session.

So it's no surprise that last week's initial report from the "Mandate Relief Redesign Team" appointed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo in January is drawing such a strong reaction. This first effort by this team of private- and public-sector leaders to tackle a deep-rooted system of mandates doesn't go far enough for anyone's liking. It especially falls well short of offering the specific, short-term actions many are looking for to provide immediate, meaningful relief.

But here's one thing it does accomplish for now, and it's something that I think has some value: It keeps building the political pressure that's going to be needed to force action on the issue. I'll say this, when's the last time the issue of mandate relief has received so much focused attention in Albany? Maybe never.

Here's something else to not overlook. A lot of

different people are going to have a lot of different ideas on how best to get at this mandate crisis - politically and practically. The potential strong point of the current strategy is that it's keeping the stakeholders together in the room, so to speak, until they work it out. The group collectively represents state legislators, mayors, county executives, town superintendents, school administrators and teachers, private-sector employers, public employees and government reform advocates.

In other words, Gov. Cuomo now has a lot riding on meaningful, successful mandate relief, beginning this year. In my view, that means we may have the best shot we've ever had for real action.

The New York State Association of Counties framed the issue of state mandates pretty dramatically late last year with a report that summarized the local property tax burden this way: "Individual counties have little control over the amount and use of these local taxes. In fact, nine state mandates consume \$4 billion or 90 percent of the \$4.4 billion in property taxes collected statewide."

In other words, local leaders argue, our hands are tied (and our budgets are determined) by unfunded and underfunded state mandates. Point taken, and it's emerging as a driving force in building the political momentum for the change that's needed.

But there can't be any letup. That's the underlying value of this first report. Its early reviews are weak, as they should

be, but there's no denying that it's already sparked even more urgency for serving up more specific recommendations for a short- and long-term restructuring of the state-local relationship.

The new report is pretty straightforward about it. "The State relies on its municipalities and school districts to deliver vital services to its residents and often prescribes exactly how these services should be provided. This limits flexibility and increases costs ... Although well-intentioned, the unwillingness of state government to give greater decision-making power and management flexibility to local governments drives up the costs of services."

It's perfectly clear that we must redefine the state-local partnership within the context of mandates. At its core, this issue stands for the era ahead - an era that demands smarter government, more cost effective programs and services, fiscal accountability, and less reliance upon the local property taxpayer to foot the bill.

Last week's report, then, stands as the true opening of the discussion. Most importantly, it reinforces the critical point: It's about property tax relief and mandate relief. You can't achieve one without the other. We can differ on how to get there, but there's no arguing that that's where we're headed. So it's worthwhile reading for anyone closely following the issue, and it's available online through my website, www.omara.nyse-nate.gov.

■ **State Sen. Tom O'Mara represents the 53rd Senate District.**

OTHER VIEW | SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

A good place to start cutting

Time to slim down, fatso.

Yes, we're talking about you, federal government. You should know by now that bad decisions, when it comes to food, are killers.

The Government Accountability Office spent several months looking for inefficient federal programs and issued its report Tuesday. The hands-down winner for most redundant use of taxpayer dollars goes to the 15 federal agencies overseeing food

safety.

We'd applaud the GAO for uncovering this incredible bloat if the report contained anything new. But 10 years ago, the National Academy of Science told Congress the very same thing, and we've been ridiculing the redundancies every year for seven years running.

Our favorite bit of absurdity: The FDA is responsible for the safety of what's inside chicken eggs, but the Department of Agriculture oversees the quality

of the eggs themselves. Whatever that means.

The GAO identified 33 other examples of redundancy in federal programs for education, defense, transportation, agriculture and housing. All told, the waste is estimated at \$62 billion a year.

President Barack Obama and House Republicans are looking for areas of agreement to put the federal budget and the deficit on a diet. Now they can't say they don't know where to start.

Redistricting reform good place to start

New York Uprising is a governmental reform outfit and one of its leaders is former New York City Mayor Ed Koch. Last fall the group got most members of the New York State Legislature to sign a pledge that they would support efforts to eliminate partisan politics from redistricting.

So popular was that pledge that it helped Republicans win control of the state Senate last fall.

Now the GOP is hedging

its collective bet.

Koch pointed the finger at the Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos of Nassau County.

"He is running out on good government ... he's obviously now the anti-reform party," Koch said.

The ex-mayor's anger was raised when Skelos called for a constitutional amendment to clean up the redistricting process, rather than simply passing legislation.

Since that would involve action by successively elected legislatures, no progress could be made for nearly a decade.

The shot across his bow moved Skelos to reconsider his position.

"It is our intention to pursue a redistricting reform measure that will meet the New York Uprising pledge," he said.

He wouldn't commit to taking the fast lane but at least he said he would look into it further.

A total of 84 Assembly members promised to enact a reform bill before Election Day last fall and 73 are backing the measure now, according to New York Uprising.

Of the 54 senators from both parties who signed on to the plan last year, 27 are still supporters.

The numbers obviously changed with the November election.

While Skelos is re-evaluating his position, the Democratic boss of the Assembly, Sheldon Silver, isn't sure the reform measure will become law.

"It's kicking the can down the road," Silver said.

Redistricting has long been one of the most corrupt practices engaged in by the New York Legislature. Whichever party happens to be holding the majority reins at the time always draws the district to guarantee reelection of its own members.

This practice has gone on for generations. And Koch is right; it's time for it to be brought to a halt once and for all.

The Legislature is in great need of cleaning its own house and this is a perfect place to begin.

...

This kid has long been a fan of science fiction - both in books and in film. I've seen or read most of the majors in that field over the past several decades.

But I was totally blown away this week when I got my first view of a much-praised 2009 film called "District 9."

A joint South African-New Zealand project with Peter Jackson as co-producer just may be the finest sci-fi I have ever seen.

■ **Bob Rolfe, a retired Leader reporter/editor, can be reached by writing The Leader, PO Box 1017, Corning, NY 14830 or theinsider1@aol.com.**

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