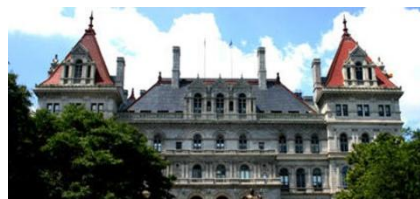


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Guest Column

for the week of February 7, 2011

"Task Force Here, Task Force There"

Reaction continues to rain down from every corner of New York State to Governor Andrew Cuomo's 2011-2012 proposed state budget, and that's as it should be. I fully expect it will continue to be a downpour until a new state budget is signed, sealed, and delivered.

But even if nothing else dramatic happens in the weeks ahead (which we all know won't be the case), the governor has already charted a new course for New York State budgeting. If nothing else, he's reframed the dialogue, refashioned the process, and redirected the politics of the annual budget adoption cycle. Most importantly, in my view, he's opened it up. That's no small feat. Governors and legislatures have been doing it the same way for a long, long time.

Now the key questions are: Where do we go from here? and Can it work? The governor's \$132.9-billion plan proposes a 2.7-percent overall reduction in total state spending and calls for a comprehensive realignment and restructuring of many state programs and services. In the most thorny, contentious areas, he's taken a novel approach by appointing a task force or a "working team" as a way to break through the logjam of opposition that's too often stood in the way of worthwhile actions in critical areas.

These teams have been in overdrive examining Medicaid redesign, mandate relief, and state agency restructuring and consolidation. They're charged with coming up with specific recommendations and, for the first time, reaching specific, targeted dollar-amount savings in order to achieve the desired cost effectiveness and efficiency. If these teams finish their work within the necessary timeframe, successfully find common ground, and put a set of concrete proposals on the budget negotiating table, we could be in store for some surprising and long-awaited turnarounds.

In explaining this new process, the governor stated, "We must work together to fix the dismal financial situation we are in. That means bringing stakeholders to the table, making everyone part of the solution. From Medicaid to education to government reform to mandate relief, government cannot do this alone."

For more information on each of these efforts – and for anyone interested in sharing some direct input – I would encourage you to visit my website (<http://www.omara.nysenate.gov>) as well as the Governor's site (<http://www.governor.ny.gov>).

So, yes, I continue to be hopeful that this year could be very different. There's a task force here, and a task force there, but altogether it's an effort that could be pointing the way toward something meaningful.

Since it's early in the process, I'll also take this chance to stress that as much as some things change, other things deserve to stay the same. It remains the Legislature's responsibility to pull apart the fabric of the Cuomo plan to make sure what it's made of and how it impacts our local communities. We're already at work doing just that and the Legislature's fiscal committees will begin a series of public hearings on the budget on Monday, February 7th.

With that in mind, I'll stress the following: I welcome and need local input. My e-mail address is omara@nysenate.gov, and I can't do enough to encourage your opinions, suggestions, and thoughts in the critical days and weeks ahead. I look forward to hearing from you.

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