

OTHER VIEW | L.A. TIMES

## America the poor

The Census Bureau reported Tuesday that almost one in six Americans was living below the federal poverty line in 2010, the highest percentage since 1993 and the largest number in at least five decades. The same day, the head of the Congressional Budget Office told a newly created deficit-reduction committee that the federal government couldn't sustain the services it had been providing for decades without major reductions in other spending, significant increases in taxes or both.

As distressing as those presentations were, they merely reinforced what is already common knowledge: The economy is in terrible shape, and the federal government can't afford to do much to help. Even if it could, the efforts by the Bush and Obama administrations since 2008 show how hard it is for Washington to revive an economy stalled by a financial crisis, even if it is willing to spend billions of dollars trying. The best one can say is that things would have been worse had Washington not pumped cash into banks and credit markets, state and local governments, and taxpayers' wallets. Just because government officials can't wave a magic wand over the economy to fix it, however, policymakers shouldn't use that as an excuse to make things worse.

One lesson from the Census Bureau's report is how important the federal safety net is during a downturn. Unemployment insurance, food stamps and tax credits for the working poor lifted the incomes of 3 million to 5 million U.S. households above the poverty line in 2010. These programs are embattled because they're costly, but they're also proving their worth as a buffer against the ravages of the downturn.

Another lesson is that the recession amplified some disturbing trends that had emerged long before the subprime mortgage meltdown. The rapid rise in poverty from 2008 through 2010 is emblematic of how much worse those at the lower end of the income scale have fared than those at the upper end, in bad times or good. Over the long term, more of the country's income and assets have been steadily concentrated in fewer hands. Folks in the middle saw disproportionate losses too. Median household income fell more than \$1,100 in 2010, and is down 7 percent from its peak in 1999.

The data provide the context for lawmakers as they evaluate President Obama's jobs proposal and the mandate in the recent debt-ceiling deal to slash spending by at least \$2.4 trillion over the coming decade. The problem goes beyond the current downturn; it's meek, bubble-fueled growth that stretches back for years. No matter who has been in power, the government's attempts to spur growth haven't translated into a sustainable improvement in the lives of most Americans. That's the real challenge posed by the Census Bureau's numbers.

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sdupree@the-leader

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### CIRCULATION

Elmer Kuehner | Circulation director  
936-4651, Ext. 320

### EDITORIAL

Stella DuPree | Managing editor  
936-4651, Ext. 361  
sdupree@the-leader.com

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## ARTIST'S VIEW



### COMMENTARY | STATE SEN. TOM O'MARA

## Tackling government inefficiency

Nothing's been easy sailing in New York state this summer. Far from it.

The hardships and losses from a steady downpour of natural disasters have kept mounting. The response to these disasters has rightly demanded most of New York government's attention and focus. So it's not surprising that the economic and fiscal challenges still facing our state, even after one of the most productive legislative sessions ever, have taken a back seat for now.

But as the pages of the calendar turn toward October, attention begins looking ahead to the 2012 legislative session. Consequently, it'll be time to refocus on legislative priorities for the coming year. That process begins now.

It begins for me at a series of local community meetings that I'll hold with our regional state assemblymen, Phil Palmesano and Chris Friend, starting this week in Bath (on Tuesday, Sept. 20, at Bath Town Hall beginning at 5:30 p.m.) and Corning (on Thursday, Sept. 22, at Corning City Hall beginning at 5:30 p.m.).

These meetings are informal and open to the public. They're aimed at giving local residents an opportunity to directly share their concerns and suggestions for better government. This year's meetings will also provide a forum to look ahead at many of the key regional issues that need to be addressed next session.

These challenges include the future of the Marcellus Shale natural gas industry, ongoing state mandate reform, job creation, infrastructure development and so many more that, I'm sure, we'll have the opportunity to talk about in more detail at the meetings.

But as the demands and responsibilities placed on government become greater and greater, the need for efficiency in programs and services calls for equal attention. So I'm also anticipating taking part in renewed state Senate efforts in the year ahead to uncover waste, inefficiency and mismanagement throughout the state bureaucracy. Government spending, after all, is New York's number one reform challenge. If we can't get our own house in order, we can't cut taxes for working families, create a better business climate for employers to create jobs, or do the thousand other things it takes to turn this state around. It all starts with getting government spending under control.

And the need has never been greater. It's the reason that one of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's very first actions was to establish what's called the Spending and Government Efficiency (SAGE) Commission (www.governor.ny.gov/sage). This commission is charged with leading the first major overhaul of the state bureaucracy since the late 1920s.

Earlier this year, the

*New York Times* reported that a series of Cuomo administration audits were revealing that state government operations "are plagued by waste and often bewildering inefficiency." The *Times* noted that the ongoing audits could yield more than \$1 billion in savings over the next several years. According to a similar report in the *New York Post*, the audits could produce approximately \$50 million in immediate savings.

The *Post* story included the following quote from Howard Glaser, the governor's director of state operations who's leading the efficiency probes, "There is no end to the horror stories."

Rest assured that as the clock ticks toward the start of the 2012 legislative session, we're going to hear more about these stories.

We've long suspected that uncontrolled spending has undermined the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of the state bureaucracy. But it's time to do something about it. We can't have too many probes into wasteful government spending, mismanaged government programs, or abused government services.

Taxpayers deserve this long-overdue accounting.

■ **State Sen. Tom O'Mara, R-Big Flats, represents the 53rd Senate District, which includes Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben and Yates counties, and a portion of Tompkins County.**

### LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## Another scary power phrase

**TO THE EDITOR** | It would appear from what I have read on the op-ed page that the right wing fringe has come up with another scary power phrase, to frighten those whose politics lie to the center. And it is "class warfare." In a recent letter it would appear that anyone who questions Rep. Tom Reed's leadership ability, or the fact that the "hard decisions"

he has made, never seem to effect those in his own income bracket, must be promoting class warfare. So it would stand to reason that anyone who states that Tommy's a one trick pony, due to the fact that, at all his dog and pony shows, that he refers to as town hall meetings. His only answer to any question, whether on Afghanistan, hydro-fracking, LP gas storage, or the billions of dollars in tax revenue that have been lost with the millions of American

manufacturing jobs, due to Free Trade deals. His only answer is to point to his well worn wave of debt charts, that he apparently sleeps with. Must be promoting class warfare. And last but not least I would like to state, if it is promoting class warfare. To point out that congressman "Greed" has become a caricature of, and a poster child for, fat cat politicians. Then I guess it is what it is.

**Michael LeBarron**  
Corning

## Many ways to help those in need

Another week, and again I am seeking help for folks in need. I pray our neighbors to the east get a break from the weather. When this column was written, a steady rain was adding insult to injury in the areas devastated by the recent floods.



**Stella DuPree**

Give what you can, please. A \$5 donation will allow the Food Bank of the Southern Tier to give a family more than \$27 worth of food and grocery products, including bottled water, peanut butter, tuna, canned soup, vegetables and cleaning supplies.

Or put on your work clothes, grab your cleaning bucket and mop and go help with cleanup. To volunteer, call the Food Bank at 796-6061.

Glad to see businesses such as Corning Inc., Dresser-Rand, Wegmans, Tops and Jubilee doing what they can to help their customers and employees.

Our local athletes are also lending a hand. Saturday they volunteered at Dresser-Rand's relief drive. I'm sure many other groups are helping as well and I thank you.

I don't want to be the one to say we told you so ... but I had to sigh when I saw the results of the supervisor's race in Cayuta. As of Friday, candidates Terry F. Gardner Sr. and Brandon K. Theetge were tied with 29 votes apiece.

Now I haven't spent a lot of time in Cayuta, but I'm willing to bet there are more than 58 registered voters living in the town.

Barring a bad case of Montezuma's Revenge or a hospital stay, there's no excuse for not voting, folks. It's your duty as American citizens. In November, put your big boy or girl pants on and head to the polls.

Meanwhile, Gardner and Theetge get to sit tight until absentee ballots are counted Sept. 21.

As Lindley historian Catherine M. Pierce said in a guest editorial Tuesday in *The Leader*: Every vote counts.

Told you so.

Had a little fun with my son Kelly this week: Told him I wouldn't be picking him up from school Wednesday because I was going to jail that afternoon. The look on his face was priceless. His jaw dropped open, his eyes widened and he turned a little pale.

"Jail?" he quietly asked. "Really?"

Yep, I told him. The sheriff had called and requested my presence.

I let him stew a bit before I told him I was just going to visit Sheriff Ordway and take a tour.

I thought I was being pretty funny. Kelly didn't. Maybe because he knew I was thinking of how there aren't any kids in jail, and well, I really could use an undisturbed nap.

However, while taking my tour of the facilities, I changed my mind. No offense, Sheriff. Your jail is quiet, clean and everyone in uniform very friendly - a great place to visit. But I wouldn't want to live there.

■ **Stella DuPree is managing editor of *The Leader*. She can be reached at sdupree@the-leader.com.**

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