



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' -- for the week of August 19, 2024 -- 'We are all in it together during times of crisis'

THOMAS F. O'MARA August 21, 2024

| ISSUE: **FLASHING FLOODING; NATURAL DISASTERS; RESPONSE AND RECOVERY**



Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature.

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, **"We are all in it together during times of crisis"**

These are the times and the crises when communities across the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions always have -- and always will -- show what we're made of.

Throughout the years that I grew up here and for the decades that I have spent representing the area in the State Legislature, we have never been strangers to devastating storms and flooding. And it happened again recently with the remnants of Hurricane Debby slamming the region with heavy rains and devastating flash flooding, especially in Steuben, Allegany, Schuyler, Tioga, and Yates counties within my legislative district.

In the aftermath of these events, it's time for federal, state, and local representatives to join forces to begin assessing the damage, coordinating and determining the recovery effort that's needed, and summoning the resources to ultimately ensure that the families, businesses, farms, and entire communities can recover and rebuild.

In addition to government, the response from so many agencies, organizations, and individuals from far and wide is incredible, inspiring, and uplifting -- and there is not enough gratitude to go around to express the appropriate thanks to everyone, from every sector and all walks of life, who has responded.

That is exactly what's needed here and so I was grateful to recently join Governor Hochul, Congressman Langworthy, Assemblymen Giglio and Palmesano, former Congressman Sempolinski, and many other county and town leaders to tour area communities and visit with local residents trying to pick up the pieces. We hoped to try to do our best to let them know that help is and will be on the way.

Governor Hochul's words were particularly encouraging and necessary when she stated, "Our state teams will be on the ground answering questions, helping people fill out forms so they can get their insurance money sooner. It's really important for homeowners and businesses to keep track of all their expenses and what they lost. Make an inventory of your belongings. And if you can't resolve a dispute with the insurance company, then we want you to file a complaint with our department."

The governor added, "But I also said we have to give people more help just to get back on their feet while they're waiting for that insurance, while we're trying to get our lives back in order. I've declared the Housing and Community Renewal agency will launch an emergency repair program

for homeowners in Allegany, Delaware, Franklin, Steuben, and St. Lawrence counties (the counties of Broome, Chemung, Chenango, Cortland, Essex, Jefferson, Lewis, Ontario, Oswego, Schoharie, Schuyler, Tioga, and Yates were since included) that were impacted by the storm. All these homeowners who have been impacted will be eligible for grants of up to \$50,000 to help pay for reimbursement of expenses related to the storm that aren't covered by insurance or other disaster relief.'"

We welcome and appreciate the governor's commitment, and we look forward to continuing to work closely with her to deliver the necessary assistance as rapidly as possible.

The initial hiccup of the Governor's program -- a significant income limitation, \$58,500, to qualify for state assistance -- was met by much public and media outcry. Advocacy by myself and my colleagues in government subsequently resulted in a significant increase in the qualifying income to \$157,800. While much improved (and frankly, I doubt Governor Hochul was even aware of that significant income disqualifier when she initially announced it in Canisteo last Sunday), I continue to scratch my head as to why any income qualifier is included here at all since prior state disaster assistance programs I've looked back on have had none. In fact, state relief following Lake Ontario flooding and shoreline damage in 2017 and 2019 had no income limitation for primary homes. The state even provided aid for second homes, i.e. lake cottages, with owners' incomes up to \$275,000. Flooding in the Mohawk Valley in 2013 was followed with a state assistance program with no income limitation.

I am also mindful of the fact that many of these same impacted families, farmers, and small businesses received no federal or state aid following Tropical Storm Fred just three years ago. We deserve better, particularly while the state spends BILLIONS on programs and services supporting illegal immigrants in New York City.

I will continue to join my regional legislative colleagues to advocate for a better, more encompassing aid program from the state. Unless individual assistance from the federal government becomes available, this type of state financial assistance is entirely at the discretion of Governor Hochul and must be a top priority. We will keep fighting for these changes on behalf of those we represent.

Additionally, we are advocating for farm and small business aid and more state assistance to our local governments for streambank hardening. Some of the large riprap implemented following Tropical Storm Fred several years ago was dislodged and washed downstream this time. We need stronger implementations. Impacted communities also need more permitted access to our streams by property owners and municipalities to clear the stream bed and banks. The state Department of Environmental Conservation has been a major hindrance in allowing this work to be done. While

DEC now says there will be easier approval following this disaster, we've heard this before and it always quickly returns to the customary DEC stonewalling on the permitting process.

We have consistently advocated for greater leeway for localities and property owners. Virtually everyone who spoke with Governor Hochul during her recent visit, including me, let her know that this is of utmost importance, and we will continue to stress its urgency.

As I stated during this recent visit to storm-ravaged communities and residents, this is a devastating event with Tropical Storm Debby rolling through, like Tropical Storm Fred rolled through a few years ago. The resilience of these communities has been amazing. The outpouring of support from neighbors, the Amish community, and quite honestly from complete strangers, reaching out across the region to help people get back on their feet, has been amazing. Collectively, we are a strong community, and we will prove it once again.

Governor Hochul being there meant a great deal to everyone, but particularly those impacted by this devastation. It's important for everyone to hear directly from her that the state intends to be there to provide for individuals and small businesses and entire communities moving forward to help get them back on their feet and sustain their lives here in one of the most beautiful places on earth to live and raise a family, to work and to farm.

It is a great community and we're all in it together. That always has been and always will be true.

###