



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Malcolm Smith

Senate Democratic Leader Smith Calls For Extension Of Legislative Session To 'Finish The People's Business'

MALCOLM A. SMITH June 19, 2007

Senate Democratic Leader Malcolm A. Smith (D-Queens) today called for the Legislature to extend this year's session -- scheduled to end tomorrow -- to complete unfinished business, including Campaign Finance and Economic Development Reforms, the Paid Family Leave Act, the Healthy Schools Act and Judicial Pay Raises.

"It's time to put in overtime," Smith said.

"There are a number of important issues that we haven't resolved yet this session and I can think of no reason for the current impasse other than politics," Smith said. "If we cannot reach agreements on these important matters by the scheduled close of session tomorrow, then I feel it is in the public's best interest to continue our work and get the job done."

In a showing of solidarity, Smith was joined by members of nearly the entire Senate Democratic Conference at a press conference held today during which he highlighted the following issues at the top of the Conference's priority list:

Campaign Finance Reform

Concerning campaign finance reform, Smith said there is no need to hold round-table hearings on

the issue, as Senate Republicans have proposed doing after the scheduled end of session.

"The problem with existing campaign finance laws is plainly clear. We don't need hearings to tell us that contribution limits are weak and riddled with loopholes," Smith said. "This is fundamentally an issue of transparency and equal access to government."

Paid Family Leave Act

Legislation currently being considered in the Senate would let workers contribute 45 cents from their paycheck per week toward a family leave benefit, allowing up to 12 weeks paid leave from work to attend to health-related matters such as a sick relative or care for a newborn child.

"Under this proposal, employees contribute to the fund, much like in an insurance policy. This avoids a costly burden to small businesses and ensures that working families get relief when they need it most," Smith said.

Economic Development Reforms

Smith noted that more needs to be done to overcome upstate New York's lagging economic growth. Between 2003 and last year, he said, statewide job growth was 2.3 percent, though Western and Northern New York experienced growth of only .7 percent.

Senate Democrats have advanced a number of proposals to spur economic development, particularly Upstate. Smith highlighted the Conference's "Brownfields Shovel-Ready Site Program," which would authorize the Empire State Development Corporation (ESDC) to purchase and clean up contaminated properties in underserved communities. Properties could then be sold to businesses for one dollar on the condition that quality jobs or affordable housing are generated on site.

"Here is an exceptional opportunity to breathe new life into abandoned or underused industrial sites and, more importantly, to breathe new life into communities where these sites are located," Smith said.

Healthy Schools Act/Violent Video Games

The Healthy Schools Act is essential for improving the lifestyles of New York's hardworking 9-to-5 families -- those who work hard, play by the rules, but nonetheless find themselves struggling to get ahead.

"With the increasing prevalence of childhood obesity and other public health risks associated with one's diet -- like diabetes -- it is critical that we promote better nutrition," said Smith. "Our schools should be on the front lines in reaching out to our kids, and the Healthy Schools plan acknowledges this."

Smith also urged support for a bill passed by the Senate requiring that all video games have a printed label containing their rating. The legislation also establishes the parent/teacher anti-violence awareness program to address the problem of youth violence.

"Parents need to know that they have the power to prevent their kids from mirroring behaviors modeled in violent video games," Smith added.

Judicial Pay Raises

"It is a travesty that our state's judges have not had a pay raise in almost nine years," Smith noted. "It is just as great a travesty that this issue has been so politically charged."

This week, Senate Democrats introduced legislation that allows for judiciary pay increases -- separate from a raise for state legislators -- in order to reach common ground over the need to provide New York's judges with adequate compensation.

Senate Republicans introduced a judicial pay measure earlier this session. However, the bill was linked to a plan for hiking legislators' pay, causing Senate Democrats to withdraw their support since Republicans had been stalling important reform measures, and continue to do so.

"Our legislation separates pay raises for judges from increases to legislators' salaries, accomplishing what we believe reflects a consensus about the need to provide our state's jurists with fair compensation," Smith said.

The legislation Democrats introduced yesterday sets the salary for state Supreme Court justices at \$162,100, effective April 1, 2005, and \$165,200, effective April 1, 2006. Salaries for other judgeships would be indexed to the pay set for Supreme Court justices.

State Court of Appeals Chief Judge Judith Kaye has long advocated for judicial pay raises and has criticized the practice of linking judicial pay with legislative pay.

"Indeed, one way to justify a pay raise for legislators is to show the public that we can get the job done -- by extending session," Smith added.

