



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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Score One for Common Sense

I say I have an “enthusiasm for efficiency.” My wife says I just love saving money. Either way, this desire to find savings in government spending can sometimes be stifling.

That’s because, as we work to improve policies that may be harmful or burdensome to our taxpayers and constituents, we often encounter entrenched interests determined to make it difficult every step of the way. Yet, every once in a while, common sense makes a comeback and those moments are what make my service to you very satisfying.

Case in point, Newsday reported this past week that our local school districts are finally able to take advantage of a new state law that I sponsored called the School Bus Mandate Relief Act. It was designed to help school districts cut costs and put their savings toward other programs. The bill’s sponsor in the Assembly was Michelle Schimel.

For years, our schools had to provide a seat on the bus for every eligible student, even those who walk, drove or were dropped off. To make a more personal analogy, imagine driving your car with no passengers to a place you didn’t have to be each day because someone, somewhere thought that someday you might have to. You’d obviously question this logic; maybe think it was a joke, but you’d be shocked when you learned that it was actually the law.

We’ve changed all that. Now school boards can use the actual number of riders in each of the preceding three years to determine if there is a consistent pattern of eligible students not using the transportation provided by the district. If so, they can reduce the number of seats accordingly. It doesn’t seem like rocket science but for years common sense was routinely ignored in favour of spending money and raising taxes.

So what does this mean here in our neighborhoods?

The Port Washington Union Free School District cut nearly 17 percent, about \$412,000, from its transportation budget. The savings is paying to retain teachers and new class offerings. Better yet, they predict even greater future savings, as much as \$1.5 million. The Herricks School District reassigned a bus route that their

director of transportation noted as saving \$81,000. Lawrence will save \$200,000 after reducing its number of buses by four to 100, and officials at Westbury Public Schools reduced the number of van routes from 16 to 11 for a savings of more than \$42,000. This is just the beginning. There are districts throughout the island doing the same and more are studying their data to determine if it makes sense for them.

There will be naysayers who will scoff at these numbers, but I suspect that you know the value of a dollar and that it isn't getting any easier to make. Even more important is that we've begun a process of empowering our school districts to save money. We are changing, however slowly, a state culture that believed there was a money tree growing in the taxpayer's backyard. There are many others ideas on how we can save our state money and I'd love to hear yours. Please write to me at martins@nysenate.gov and share them with me.