



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Senator Martins on the State of the State

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As is custom, Governor Cuomo gave his State of the State speech last week in which New York governors traditionally outline where we stand and where they hope to take us. The news outlets naturally put their own spin on things so although there's not enough room here to touch on all aspects of the speech, I thought it would be good to review a few major ones together.

Much attention was paid to the Governor's call for a constitutional amendment legalizing non-Indian casino gambling and the plan to build a convention center, casino and hotel complex at the Aqueduct Racetrack in Queens. Constitutional amendments have to be approved twice by the legislature, then once in public referendum so I think it will be difficult to build that kind of consensus. The reality is that previous attempts at passing such a constitutional amendment have failed. Realistically though, we already have gaming in various forms and on reservations and even have more slot machines than any other state in the region. So the question becomes one of scale. As regards plans for Aqueduct, the Governor has from a practical sense removed the possibility of a casino at Belmont. That being clear, it allows us to come together and refocus our attention on what can be built there that will best fit the needs of the community, create jobs and foster economic

development.

The governor also called for a new, less-expensive pension tier for future public employees to help rein in skyrocketing costs. Our long-term financial stability is tied to our comprehensively addressing this issue but as it is loaded with competing special interests it will be difficult to come to agreement. We must start by acknowledging that New York maintains one of the most generous public pension plans in the nation but sustains it by very rigid mandates that govern contribution rates. Thanks to a failing economy, these mandates have instituted a roller coaster of sorts, with next year's contribution rates up nearly 100 percent since 2009. They've blown holes in the budgets of the state, local governments and school districts that as of this year also face a tax-cap. While we clearly need a solution, it must be tied to reforming mandates so we can flatten costs and create a sound and predictable fixed rate of contribution. Such stability would inevitably result in lower property taxes.

While the governor again stressed the need to focus on education, I would be remiss if I did not recognize the world class schools we have here in the district. Our teachers and administrators are exceptional. Let's not lose sight of this as we discuss the economics of educating our children. I will continue to fight to ensure that Long Island, including our schools, receives its fair share of state aid as we struggle through these difficult economic times.

A notable idea that didn't receive enough attention was his proposal for overhauling the energy grid. He suggests a "master plan" to establish an "electricity highway" that transfers power from Quebec and Western New York to downstate areas that need it most. The building of transmission lines means access to lower cost electricity for Long Island families and Long Island businesses and, ultimately, new jobs and economic development.

Last but not least is the Governor's infrastructure plan. His "New York Works" includes building a new Tappan Zee Bridge, improving 48 state parks and historic sites, and refurbishing more than 100 bridges and 2,000 miles of roads. I couldn't be more pleased. Plainly spoken, our infrastructure is crumbling and hasn't had a shot in the arm since the days of Robert Moses. Best yet, it would puts thousands of our neighbors back to work with good-paying jobs. As I've noted before, we shouldn't simply be supplementing incomes lost to disappearing jobs. We should be fighting for public-private partnerships that encourage growth, stimulate innovation and ultimately replace those jobs with new ones. There is simply no substitute for the economic and social value of a good job.

That's it for now, a quick tour of some major points in the Governor's speech. There were other ideas, some of which I'll address in future columns. While this year appears as challenging as the last, we intend to address issues as we did last year – with fiscal responsibility and balanced discussion. While the governor said "we've learned to walk, this year we'll run," I'll simply say we will keep walking at an even better pace.