



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

O'Mara questions Cuomo budget proposals for environmental conservation, Southern Tier agriculture

THOMAS F. O'MARA January 28, 2015

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Albany, N.Y., January 28—State Senator Tom O'Mara (R,C-Big Flats), the newly appointed chairman of the Senate Environmental Conservation Committee, today joined many of his Senate and Assembly colleagues at a joint, public hearing to examine Governor Andrew Cuomo's state budget proposals for environmental conservation, agriculture and energy.

Today's hearing in the Legislative Office Building represented the first in a series of public reviews of Cuomo's budget plan being conducted by the Legislature's fiscal committees. The hearings will continue weekly until the end of February and can be viewed online through O'Mara's [Senate website](#).

O'Mara was named [the Senate's new Environmental Conservation Committee chairman last week](#).

At today's budget hearing, O'Mara took the opportunity to question state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner Joe Martens on several issues including, most prominently, proposed DEC staffing levels and their impact on the agency's decision making process, which O'Mara criticized as being too slow and drawn out on critical issues including the development of liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities and the development of the Marcellus Shale natural gas industry.

"We heard at today's hearing the range and the complexity of the challenges facing New York State in this issue area," said O'Mara. "So I appreciated this chance to directly question and to receive input from Commissioner Martens and other top officials, as well as many advocates and stakeholders. Now I look forward to working with my Senate colleagues to try to ensure that the new state budget addresses the state's environmental concerns adequately, effectively and fairly. These challenges and issues confronting New York are vital to the overall environmental and economic well-being of the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions, and the state as a whole. In particular, I remain deeply concerned about the DEC's decision making process that too often in recent years has appeared to be unnecessarily drawn out and delayed."

[\[watch Senator O'Mara's exchange with Commissioner Martens at today's hearing\]](#)

[\[read more on O'Mara's questioning at today's budget hearing on Gannett News and Capital New York\]](#)

Following Martens testimony, O'Mara later questioned state Agriculture Commissioner Richard Ball on the details of a Cuomo proposal to establish a \$30-million fund for farmland preservation in the Southern Tier and whether that fund would be significant enough in light of the Cuomo administration's recent decision to ban any development of the Marcellus Shale natural gas industry in the Southern Tier – which, O'Mara said, has devastated many Southern Tier farmers and landowners and threatens the loss of many farms and farmland.

Ball said that the details of the proposed Southern Tier farmland preservation program are still being worked out within the Cuomo administration. The commissioner acknowledged, under questioning by O'Mara, that one idea under discussion would be to provide farmers a one-time, per-acreage payment in return for a potential 20- to 25-year easement to preserve their land in farming.

Such a state-funded farmland preservation easement program would pale in comparison to what many farmers could have received from leasing their land for oil and natural gas exploration and development, O'Mara said, stressing again that the hopes of many Southern Tier farmers and landowners have been "eviscerated" by the loss of potential income from natural gas development and that the proposed fund would not replace that lost opportunity.

"This fund seems to be some acknowledgement of desperation in the Southern Tier, particularly as farmers go bankrupt or struggle to pay off property taxes," said O'Mara, adding that the envisioned farm preservation proposal gives "short shrift" to the Southern Tier. By comparison, he further noted, the State Fair in Syracuse is slated to receive \$50 million for upgrades.

[\[watch Senator O'Mara's questioning of Commissioner Ball at today's hearing\]](#)

Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Commissioner Rose Harvey and New York State Energy Research and Development Authority President John B. Rhodes also testified at today's hearing. Additionally, legislators were scheduled to hear testimony from representatives of numerous advocacy organizations including the New York Farm Bureau, American Farmland Trust, New York State Fish and Wildlife Management Board, New York State Conservation Council, The Nature Conservancy, Audubon New York, Parks and Trails New York and The Adirondack Council.

One of the Senate's key committee assignments, O'Mara has said that as chairman of the Environmental Conservation Committee he hopes to continue the committee's focus on numerous regional and statewide challenges including: soil and water conservation and quality; energy-related demands including the development and promotion of cleaner sources of energy; open space and preservation initiatives impacting farmland, forests and other state resources; brownfields cleanup; solid and hazardous waste management; invasive and endangered species; and fish and wildlife.

O'Mara said that he will remain committed to working with his legislative colleagues and the governor to strike a reasonable, sensible balance between environmental conservation and protection, and the need to spark and strengthen economic growth and private-sector job creation regionally and statewide.