



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Where's The Reform?

JAMES L. SEWARD February 26, 2009

After years of promising fundamental reforms to ensure greater transparency and accountability, the new senate Democratic majority has actually taken New York's notoriously flawed state budget process and made it fundamentally worse on every level. In fact, this year's budget process has been more closed, more secretive and more dysfunctional than ever before.

In 2007 I voted in favor of the landmark budget reform law. The new law promised a more open, orderly and timely budget adoption process – a process that included firmly established timelines, more public disclosure and greater accountability. Now here we are, just two years after its adoption, and the letter and spirit of this important budget reform statute are being completely ignored by Democratic legislative leaders.

The legislative law requires leaders to compile and publicly issue a "Joint Legislative Budget Schedule" within ten days of the governor's final budget submission. The deadline for issuing this public schedule has been completely ignored this year – no schedule has been compiled or issued. This "Joint Legislative Budget Schedule" is one of the cornerstones of the 2007 budget reform law, providing a critical framework of timetables to ensure the adoption of a publicly negotiated on time budget.

In addition, in previous years, open public, bi-partisan leaders meetings were held to help ensure transparency and facilitate an on time budget. Now that the governor, senate majority leader, and assembly speaker are all Democrats from New York City, this provision has been completely tossed aside. There is no upstate voice at the table when budget discussions take place, and the public has been shut out as well.

The governor did make one commendable change this year. He presented his budget proposal a month in advance with the idea that money could be saved if a budget was adopted by March 1. The accelerated budget deadline was seemingly forgotten and most certainly will not be met. According to the governor's own calculations, missing the deadline will cost New Yorkers \$1.3 billion.

The governor has also dragged his feet on a request from senate Republicans to resubmit his budget in order to remove his tax hikes and many cuts due to the monumental size and scope of the federal stimulus package. His refusal to resubmit his budget will undoubtedly lead to additional delays going forward, and also raises questions about whether he intends to cut the legislature out of upcoming spending decisions related to the federal stimulus package.

Upstate New York has very specific needs when it comes to economic development. Infrastructure concerns are high on the list, and in order to stimulate job growth federal funds must be used for road improvements, sewer and water upgrades, and similar projects. The need for broadband internet service is also high in many of our rural towns and villages. To spur job growth these much needed projects must be funded.

The senate Democrats' recent passage of the deficit reduction plan is another clear sign that they have no interest in real reform or accountability. This misguided plan, which raided

SUNY tuition funds, increased insurance costs, and spent funds that should have been used for job creating, low cost energy initiatives, was rushed to the floor using a “message of necessity” – allowing no time whatsoever for public scrutiny. In fact, senate Republicans only got a glimpse of the plan hours before it was put to a vote. This is exactly the type of political game that needs to be stopped.

The deficit reduction plan also stole money set aside for non-profit groups, local governments, and other entities. These were funds groups were expecting to receive as reimbursement for checks they have already written. Instead, they are left holding the bag thanks to a plan cooked up by the governor and other New York City Democrats behind closed doors.

After years of claiming to be “reformers”, the senate Democrats have rapidly established a clear pattern of broken promises, hypocrisy, and closed, partisan, secretive government.

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