



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

James L. Seward

STAR Has Fallen

JAMES L. SEWARD April 23, 2009

Senate Democrats held a recent press conference in New York City touting a plan to revive the STAR property tax rebate checks. Unfortunately this is nothing more than a desperate attempt to divert attention from their votes to eliminate the tax relief program. They stole the car last month. Now they want to return it.

First, a little history lesson. My Republican colleagues and I created the STAR rebate program three years ago. The purpose was to provide a measure of relief to the state's overburdened taxpayers. The checks arrived in the fall and varied based on household income and school district, averaging around \$300 to \$400. While not an enormous sum, it was helpful in paying the property tax bill or covering the cost of new clothes or books for students returning to school. For senior citizens on a fixed income, these checks were extremely valuable in helping them deal with rising property taxes. People have come to rely on these funds.

Unfortunately when the governor and the leaders of the senate and assembly, all New York City Democrats, concocted the new state budget, they did not see the need for this important property tax relief tool. The STAR rebate checks were dropped entirely, while taxes and fees jumped by the billions. If someone says the state budget raised taxes only on the wealthy, remind him that losing the STAR rebates is a tax increase on the middle class

Once this secret budget was revealed analysts discovered a record breaking spending increase of \$12 billion. In order to fund that spending spree families will see their taxes rise an average of \$2400. At a time when people are losing their jobs and struggling to put food on the table, this type of tax increase is unacceptable.

I joined my senate Republican colleagues in pointing out these facts during the budget debate. A number of Republican amendments were offered, including one that would have saved the STAR rebate checks. I voted in favor of the amendment along with 29 other senators. Unfortunately, all 32 Democrats were content to kill off the rebate checks. They then went on to approve the backbreaking budget.

Now, a couple of weeks later, those same Democrats are holding press conferences calling for the return of the program they killed off. One senator said "It is our responsibility to provide real and immediate relief for New Yorkers." Well, you had your chance when it really counted, and instead you voted with the governor to raise taxes on the middle class.

This latest false promise is just a smoke-screen to cover up a bad budget. Speaker Sheldon Silver has said the assembly will not pass this last-ditch plan and the governor says there is no money to pay for it. The only thing senate Democrats can hope to achieve now is that they will be able to fool voters into thinking they feel their pain.

Senate Republicans offered an alternative budget plan that included property tax relief for overburdened homeowners, mandate relief for school districts and local governments and real, job creating economic development tools to help stimulate New York's economy. The proposal, entitled A Better Plan, was the only alternative to the governor's budget proposal released publicly. The plan included the STAR rebate checks.

Unlike the hollow proposal being shopped around now by senate Democrats, the Republican plan offered a commonsense strategy to help solve our state's fiscal woes. The governor and the other leaders never responded.

We need to focus on real solutions to help the middle class and upstate businesses. I'm pleased to see senate Democrats think the STAR rebate program is one of those solutions. It's just too bad they didn't think that way a couple of weeks ago, when they could have helped homeowners instead of raising their property tax burden.