



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of June 15, 2020 ~ 'Keeping our reopenings moving forward'

THOMAS F. O'MARA June 15, 2020

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Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column "From the Capitol..."

This week, **"Keeping our reopenings moving forward"**

We cannot risk forgetting that we remain in the midst of a dangerous pandemic and public health has to stay paramount.

Specifically on the COVID-19 response, it is positive news that the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions are moving forward into Phase III. While frustrations remain with the clarity and pace of various executive-mandated orders and guidelines, we need to continue recognizing the remarkable commitment and sacrifice of individual citizens.

We are moving forward because millions of individual New Yorkers -- here at home, and from every corner of this state -- understood the public health threat and summoned the personal responsibility necessary to get it under control.

Now, to keep moving forward, continue listening to our public health departments because we cannot risk getting set back in our recovery and rebuilding.

It's also fair, and necessary, at this point to keep reassessing the state response.

Toward this end, I continue to question Governor Cuomo's reluctance to allow individual school districts to move forward with in-person graduation ceremonies as they see fit while fully adhering to all of the fundamental distancing, mask-wearing and other safety recommendations.

The Cuomo administration recently took a step in the right direction by permitting ceremonies of up to a total of 150 people in attendance. Nevertheless, that still leaves many school districts unable to conduct a collective gathering for their graduating school community.

I think that's wrong. I believe we can and should trust school district administrators to conduct safe graduation ceremonies. In my view, given all of the recent civil protest and unrest, these traditional high school graduation ceremonies for our young people to celebrate community, unity, achievement, and hope for the future are extremely meaningful and necessary in 2020.

I continue to urge Governor Cuomo to recognize their overriding value at this time and place in New York State. You can do that too by calling the governor's office at 518-474-8390, or by sending an online message through the following web page: <https://www.governor.ny.gov/content/governor-contact-form>.

There was, however, an important breakthrough on another front.

Not long ago I joined area Assemblymen Phil Palmesano and Chris Friend to call on the Cuomo administration to stop delaying the ability of counties and towns to begin this summer's local road and bridge work.

We were joined in our call to action by transportation, construction, and local government leaders from across the state. In addition to the state associations representing county and town highway superintendents, other local roads advocates included the state Association of General Contractors, Association of Counties, Association of Towns, and Conference of Mayors.

We noted that local transportation work remained on hold awaiting the release of state funding and the state authorizations counties need before moving forward with projects. We called for the state to release approximately \$743 million in local transportation aid enacted as part of the 2020-2021 state budget, including funding through several key programs such as the Consolidated Local Streets and Highway Improvement Program (CHIPS) and Extreme Winter Recovery.

Furthermore, we warned that any prolonged delay would result in yet another hard hit to local economies and local jobs.

In our letter to Governor Cuomo on May 27, we wrote, "As you know, over the past decade we have worked closely with county and town highway superintendents and local transportation leaders from throughout New York State to help lead the 'Local Roads Matter' advocacy campaign that has continually highlighted the fundamental role that this system plays as a foundation of local economies.

"Now that New York is beginning to reopen and as we all look forward to getting our local economies moving again, we believe it should be a top priority to maintain a strong state commitment to local transportation infrastructure as one effective and commonsense way to reinvigorate economic sectors that have been hit so hard by the COVID-19 response."

Fortunately, the Cuomo administration heard us on this one and has now given the go-ahead to these local infrastructure projects.

This work will be another badly needed jumpstart for regional economies, and we look forward to working to keep our reopenings moving forward in other ways.