



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of March 15, 2021 ~ 'A critically important budget for future generations'

THOMAS F. O'MARA March 15, 2021

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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...

This week, **“A critically important budget for future generations”**

Last March, right around this time, we were at the beginning stages of a COVID-19 response that would turn the world and our individual lives upside down in ways most of us never envisioned at the start.

It was also at this time last year that Governor Cuomo and legislative leaders in the Senate and Assembly were negotiating a new state budget. Once the details of the state’s 2020-21 fiscal plan began to leak out, I issued the following warning on March 23, 2020, “We are facing an unprecedented shutdown of New York State’s government, economy, individual communities, and day-to-day life. Everyone’s attention is focused and needs to remain focused on getting through this public health crisis. We can do a budget that keeps this state running and meeting its obligations throughout this emergency. Once we have weathered this storm, we can get to work assessing the damage, determining who and what needs repair, and have an open and full discussion on the best way to move forward for this entire state, upstate and downstate. That would be common sense. That would be responsible. That would be fair. I hope that’s the course Governor Cuomo and legislative leaders will take.”

One year later, the same warning holds true. All signs point to the fact that we have weathered the worst of this pandemic. We are reopening economies, schools, and the everyday fabric of our communities. Vaccine supplies are ramping up and distributions are expanding.

In short, there is, finally, real hope that life as we knew it before last March, in large measure and after great pain and sacrifice, can and will return.

This week, legislative conferences in both houses of the Legislature – Senate Republicans and Senate Democrats, Assembly Republicans and Assembly Democrats – will put forth “one-house” budget

documents essentially spelling out each conference's fundamental priorities for the final 2021-2022 New York State budget.

This year's final budget, the first that can at least begin to look ahead to the post-COVID future, still needs to be a budget of restraint, I believe.

In other words, the newly enacted federal stimulus relief package delivers a windfall to New York's state and local governments, somewhere in the neighborhood of \$25 billion. It is a massive, one-time infusion of federal aid that, in my opinion as well as in my position as the ranking member on the Senate Finance Committee, needs to be utilized responsibly.

One of New York's leading fiscal watchdogs, the Empire Center, puts it this way, "The highest priority of state and local officials should be to avoid plowing the federal money into recurring spending commitments that will create bigger budget deficits in the future. In an ideal world, New York pols will embark on a careful, painstaking assessment of needs, weighing short-term relief against recurring long-term benefits."

That's well said and I would largely reissue my March 2020 warning about not going too far too fast in this upcoming state budget until "we can get to work assessing the damage, determining who and what needs repair, and have an open and full discussion on the best way to move forward for this entire state, upstate and downstate. That would be common sense. That would be responsible. That would be fair. I hope that's the course Governor Cuomo and legislative leaders will take."

As far as I know or have seen, there has not yet been a full, thorough, transparent accounting and assessment of the deep-rooted, grassroots-level impact COVID-19 has had and will continue to have on New York and all of our communities, in every region of the state, over the next several years.

And yet, the clouds are already forming that Governor Cuomo and the Democrat majorities in the Senate and Assembly are preparing to grab hold of this one-time federal funding and still embark on a wild goose chase for even more, new, unneeded revenue – through massive tax increases and other actions – in order to move forward with massive new spending with New York State already facing potential budget shortfalls and other fiscal burdens for years to come.

Furthermore, and equally alarming to me and many others around the Capitol: We are very concerned that Governor Cuomo, who is hanging on by his fingernails under the weight of multiple and growing scandals, will not hesitate to use this budget process, through which he can exercise extraordinary power, to buy off the Democrat legislative majorities from aggressively pursuing his removal from office.

These next several weeks will be telling and critically important for future generations.

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