

Grins and groans

THE ISSUE | Grins and groans from news of the week.

OUR OPINION | Groan to a 11th hour budget deal, a president afraid of leading. Grin to a joke of a budget.

Groan

Think lawmakers are going to get any kind of positive recognition for putting their partisan differences aside and settling on a budget deal at the last minute to avert a government shutdown?



Not here. Not now. Not a chance.

Why should members of Congress receive praise for something that's part of their job? That's like parents paying students to get good grades.

Both parties used this budget battle as a platform to grandstand and demonize the opposition. Meanwhile, President Barack Obama stayed out of the public eye, not out of some kind of high-minded principle about Congress controlling the purse strings, but because his cocktail-napkin electoral math showed that the best way to stay clean is not to roll around in the mud with Congress.

The scary thing is that the 2011 budget battle was the easiest leg of the budget triple crown. If the last week has been any indication, the battles over raising the debt limit and the 2012 budget should be bruising and bloody.

Groan

It's time for President Barack Obama to stop thinking about the 2012 election and think more about the 2012 budget.



The President officially kicked off his re-election campaign last week, but he's been in campaign mode since Republicans rode the Tea Party wave into power in November.

Since he midterm election, Obama has acted more like a moderate Republican than the progressive Democrat for whom many voted.

He acquiesced too quickly on extending the Bush-era tax cuts for the richest Americans and gave away too much during negotiations for the last pair of continuing resolutions.

Here's a news flash for the President. Trying to secure a second term is one of the best ways of ensuring you will be a one-term president.

The base is disappointed and disillusioned with the president. They didn't vote for Obama because he was a little less conservative than John McCain. They voted for him because he wasn't afraid to lay out an unashamedly liberal agenda.

Before the battle over the debt ceiling and the 2012 budget kick into high gear, the President needs to do some soul searching to find his progressive values and then draw a line in the sand when negotiating with Republicans.

He need not worry about Republicans. Between almost shutting the government down over a few million dollars for Planned Parenthood and the cuts they will propose in the future, the GOP has handed the President the means of their own demise.

All the President needs to do is articulate his vision of a more compassionate and exceptional America and independents will return.

Grin

Things got pretty contentious in Washington, D.C. last week.

Fortunately, U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan tried to lighten the mood with his 2012 budget proposal.



Unfortunately it's a joke that most had heard before. It contained the completely predictable Republican punch line about how America can eliminate the deficit completely on the backs of the poor and the elderly while the richest Americans receive tax cuts.

Still, Ryan deserves a little credit, even if nobody laughed at his knock-knock joke of a budget.

ARTIST'S VIEW



“...NOT ONLY DO WE SAVE ON GAS, WE GET THE MILK FOR FREE...”



COMMENTARY | STATE SEN. TOM O'MARA

Volunteers needed

Former President Ronald Reagan said it this way, “The work of volunteer groups throughout our country represents the very heart and soul of America.”

In his January 1989 inaugural address former President George H.W. Bush, in one of the more memorable phrases in modern presidential history, described the nation's network of volunteer community groups as “a thousand points of light.”

Recalling the words of these former American leaders serves a couple of purposes. First, they still stand to highlight this week's observance of National Volunteer Week. But most importantly, they remain fitting tributes to the thousands of community volunteers across the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions making such a difference in thousands of lives. From the American Red Cross to Habitat for Humanity to RSVP, our volunteers make all the difference. They can't be thanked enough.

But along with the opportunity this week offers to express our collective gratitude, it's also a chance to stay aware of some troubled waters. That was the idea behind open houses that were held at a number of local volunteer firehouses across the area this past weekend. These events were the culmination of a “Recruit NY” effort coor-

minated since the beginning of the year by the Firemen's Association of the State of New York (FASNY), the New York State Association of Fire Chiefs, the state Association of Fire Districts, and others as a way to raise awareness of the ongoing need for emergency services volunteers.

The point to remember is that local volunteer fire departments, according to statistics, account for 73 percent of all fire departments in America. New York state government has its hands full for the foreseeable future confronting a long list of economic and fiscal challenges. But through it all, we still have to keep an eye on the rest of New York's to-do list and that includes the ability of local volunteer fire companies and ambulance services to recruit and retain volunteers.

It's been a well-documented concern over the past decade. Organizations like FASNY and the state Association of Towns have done their best to heighten public awareness. According to FASNY, the number of volunteer firefighters statewide has declined from 140,000 in the early 1990s to approximately 110,000 today. Volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs) experienced a decline from more than 50,000 to 35,000 during the same period. Several years ago the Association of Towns issued an

alarming report, “Volunteer Emergency Services: A System in Crisis,” which pegged the cost to local taxpayers statewide at more than \$7 billion annually to replace volunteers with paid fire and ambulance services.

There are a host of factors outside the sphere of government influence that are causing the ranks of volunteers to be stretched so thin. But the decline has become especially troubling among emergency services volunteers, and it deserves all of the attention it can get. There are actions that government has and should continue to take to provide incentives that just might help reverse the decline. I've sponsored legislation in the past identifying some that could work. To try to help, New York State has already established tax breaks, tuition assistance, and other incentives.

But more needs to be done. We just need to stay focused on efforts, including campaigns like Recruit NY, that recognize and trumpet the critical position emergency services volunteers hold in our communities.

President Reagan may have said it best of all when he said that government “can never take the place of volunteers.”

■ State Sen. Tom O'Mara, R-Big Flats, represents the 53rd Senate District.

COMMENTARY | MAIWAND SAFI

Poppies making a comeback

After several years of attempting to earn a living by growing crops other than poppies, frustrated farmers in Kapisa province are once again producing the raw material for heroin.

They say soaring drug prices, along with the government's failure to fulfill the promises it made as part of its eradication program, left them no choice.

“The government has made us many promises, but has not honored them,” said Mohammad Ajan, a farmer in the Tagab district of the province. “I haven't cultivated poppy for the past few years. It's ruined my life. I could be making as much from growing poppy in one year as I'd earn from other crops in 10 years. Why shouldn't I grow it?”

Both Afghan government officials and representatives of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime had warned that poppy production was

likely to soar in 2011 after blight killed off half of last year's poppy crop, driving prices up to their highest level since 2004.

Since the ouster of the Taliban government in 2001, the international community has spent billions of dollars on poppy-eradication and crop-substitution programs.

Initially, farmers were paid for destroying their poppy fields. The Afghan government eventually stopped that program and instead promised to provide farmers with seeds, fertilizers and infrastructure improvements so they could deliver their crops to market.

Many farmers say the central government never fulfilled its promises, prompting them to resume poppy cultivation.

Najib Safi, a local official with the counter-narcotics agency, acknowledged the government failed to fulfill its promise to undertake several reconstruction projects. He also said

that the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development failed to find work for those who stopped growing poppies as it had promised.

Another provincial official, who asked that his name not be used, conceded that the government had failed to provide promised irrigation systems, fertilizers and improved types of seed to farmers who stopped growing poppies.

Ultimately, it may have been the soaring prices farmers could charge for their poppy crop that made switching back irresistible.

Samiullah, a landowner in Tagab district, said rising prices were a major factor in his decision to resume poppy cultivation.

“Last year, opium was priced at \$90 per kilogram,” he said. “This year, it's \$380.”

■ Maiwand Safi is a reporter in Afghanistan who writes for The Institute for War & Peace Reporting.

Back to the days of the Comic Council

Several years ago the publisher of this newspaper asked me to stop referring to

Corning's Comic Council. He did so, I later learned, at the request of a mayor whose face was deservedly of a bright red hue.

Being naught but a good guy, I did as he asked. And we haven't had City Council members wearing fright wigs or over-sized shoes for several years.

Sorry, gang, the truce is over.

When any group of people elected to represent the

populace have nothing better to do than to argue over whether agendas should be printed on one side

of a sheet of paper or two, it's time to bring out the wigs again.

There may have been more moronic arguments in the annals of the Comic Council, but none come immediately to mind.

Come on, people, is it really too hard to turn over a piece of paper and read the other side?

In their masterly resolution of the problem, the Council decided that henceforth resolution lists would be printed on one side only but lists of money that the city owes was fine to print on both sides.

This would seem to indicate a priority problem on the second floor at City Hall.

No wonder councilmen are so frequently facing fiscal strictures. If no one cares how easy it is to read a list of who is owed public money, why should we be surprised when the city manager is forced to cry “wolf” so often?

One wonders what matters got shoved to the back burner when two council meetings were spent trying to solve the egregious problem of “one side or two.”

By the way, boys, how do any of you handle reading a book?

•••

I'm not sure that roundabouts are the solution to the traffic problem at two busy intersections on Route 13 in Horseheads.

The state has proposed the “roundy-roundies” for the intersections of that highway and East Franklin Street and Old Ithaca Road.

Eyeballing the diagram recently printed in this newspaper, I can see how they are supposed to work and heaven knows both corners need assistance.

But while they may eliminate T-bone accidents of the most serious type, they still leave open possibility of grazing collisions three times per maneuver.

As I say this may be the solution to a long-standing problem, but I'd like to hear more explanation of how this whole business will work.

The State Department of Transportation will explain the whole proposal in a meeting at 6 p.m. April 20 at the Horseheads Town Hall.

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