

OPINION

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POLITICS | SEN. TOM O'MARA

2014 legislative agenda: manufacturing

From job losses to high taxes, and from local fiscal crises to the alarming threat of illegal drugs like methamphetamine and heroin, the challenges are piled high. So it's never too early to start looking ahead. Over the next several weeks, it's worth taking a closer look at several actions that I'd like to see singled out right from the start of the 2014 legislative session.

For me, it continues to begin and end with the upstate economy. It continues to be a case of good news-bad news. While the statewide unemployment rate dips slightly, another report shows that New York leads the nation in worker layoffs.

Or take a look at a map recently released by the state comptroller's office as part of a report on the overall fiscal condition of local governments statewide (www.osc.state.ny.us). It tells the story.

Using local sales tax revenue as an indicator of overall economic strength, the comptroller's report shows a stark divide between upstate and downstate - but singles out our Southern Tier region for economic decline. Sales tax growth was strong downstate, less so across the upstate region generally, but significantly down in Southern Tier counties including Chemung (-6.4 percent), Schuyler (-3.4) and Steuben (-3.8).

While the challenge is beyond the reach of government action in many ways, there are steps government can take to make a difference. Very early in this year's session, I joined some of my Senate colleagues in putting forth a "Blueprint for Jobs" to keep Albany's attention focused on job-creating actions we believe still haven't been taken in New York state - but need



TOM O'MARA

to be. Like regulatory reform. New York's regulatory burden is economically destructive. "Blueprint for Jobs" would direct state agencies to repeal at least 1,000 job-killing rules and regulations - a move modeled after a successful effort in the state of Florida. I'll highlight just one more: manufacturing. This year's state budget included a meaningful tax break for upstate manufacturers when the tax rate on manufacturers will be reduced by 25 percent - five years from now. Does one broad-based action, five years down the road, go far enough, fast

enough? I don't think so. That's why I'm continuing to sponsor and will keep pushing for legislation to fully phase out the tax over two years

Equally important, the Legislature rejected a proposal by the governor earlier this year to extend, for five years, a nearly 600-percent utility tax hike first imposed in 2009. But we were only able to get the governor to agree to a three-year phase-out of this higher tax. It needs to be eliminated sooner. Commonly known as the 18-a assessment, New York consumers, farmers, school districts, not-for-profits and, especially, manufacturers have been hit hard by this higher assessment on their utility bills. It was a bad move four years ago when I voted against it; it's worse now when New York's consumers and employers find it even harder to make ends meet. It's a

tax hike that's already taken \$1.2 billion out of the economy.

Despite losses and other ongoing challenges, the manufacturing sector remains strong in New York. It produces nearly \$70 billion in goods annually, accounting for over six percent of the state's economic output, and supports more than 1.1 million jobs statewide. Economic analysts also stress that manufacturing's position for vital growth within the overall development of a 21st century, high-tech, research-and-development based economy. Earlier this year, for example, Corning Incorporated announced plans to invest \$250 million and expand its diesel manufacturing plant in the town of Erwin. It's a move that's expected to create 250 local jobs.

Manufacturing has always been the economic engine of many upstate

communities. I believe it remains our best hope for revitalization. We can start with a pro-job, pro-private sector, pro-manufacturing tax cut like the one I'm sponsoring. We can start by eliminating higher utility taxes like the 18-a assessment. We can start with long-overdue, comprehensive regulatory reform.

These moves alone could help create thousands of good-paying, private-sector jobs over the next few years, encourage existing manufacturers to expand and invest in their New York facilities and make the state a more attractive place for other manufacturers to locate their operations here in the future.

State Sen. Tom O'Mara, R-Big Flats, represents New York's 58th Senate District, which includes Steuben, Chemung, Schuyler and Yates counties, and part of Tompkins County.

OTHER VIEW | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The soft fall of Jesse Jackson Jr.

I grew up in a house with great expectations. Everything I do has a mark of excellence on it. I did what my community said do - go to college, get a degree, come back to it, be a faithful servant and play by the rules. If I want to be a lawyer, that's not enough. I need to be a Supreme Court justice one day. If I want to be an elected official, that's not enough. One day, son, you may be president." - Jesse Jackson Jr., quoted in the Chicago Tribune, May 26, 1995.

The serial thieving allowed the prominent and well-to-do couple - they earned nearly \$350,000 in 2011 - to spend some \$750,000 looted from political funds. "This was a knowing, organized joint misconduct that was repeated over many years," U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson said Wednesday in Washington.

Federal prosecutors wanted the felonious congressman to do four years in prison, a term near the low end of federal guidelines. The judge instead chose 30 months. Jesse Jr. will surrender around Nov. 1 and, barring the unexpected, will be home before Christmas 2015, having served 85 percent of that sentence. His wife, Sandi, then will serve 12 months.

The light penance got us thinking about another ex-congressman, Rod Blagojevich. He and Jackson once were so close in the U.S. House that one colleague called them Salt and Pepper. Blagojevich's conviction on 18 corruption counts certainly eclipsed Jackson's plundering. But in dispatching the disgraced governor

for 14 years - he'll probably serve almost 12 - U.S. District Judge James Zagel made what ought to be the resounding thunder at every public corruption sentencing:

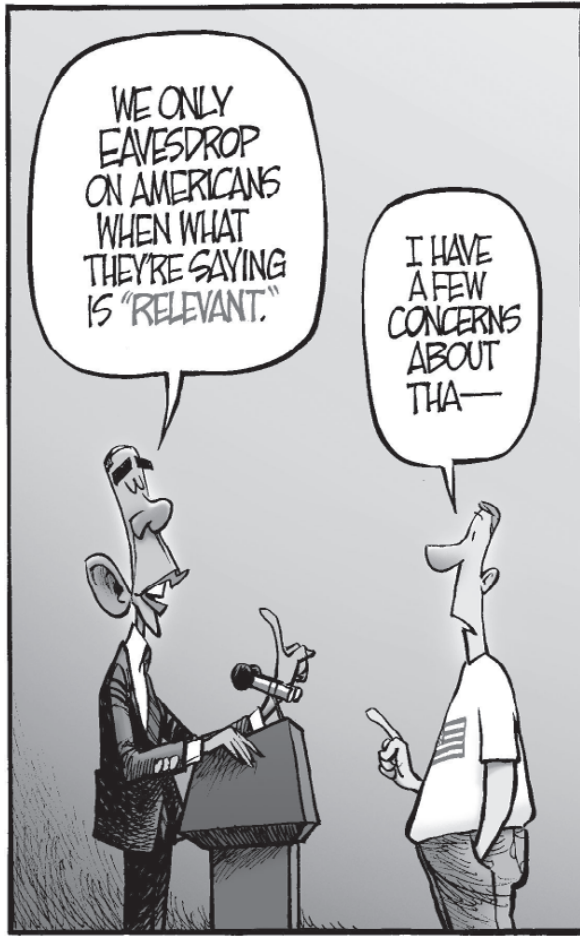
"The harm is the erosion of public trust in government" because when a politician goes bad he damages a system that relies on the willing participation of its citizens. "You," Zagel said, looking at Blagojevich, "did that damage." As did Jesse Jr. and Sandi Jackson. They should feel great relief that they are not being more harshly punished for their gaudy greed, their abuse of their constituents' trust.

The case similarly comes to an unsatisfying close for mental health advocates who have seen a possible teaching moment devolve into unanswered suspicions: Although his lawyer said Wednesday that Jackson "suffers from a very, very serious mental health disease," a prosecutor countered that because Jackson pleaded guilty rather than stand trial, there is no expert testimony, or evidence discovery process, or independent examination of the defendant. One of Jackson's prime explanations for his crime will not be litigated.

We wish the Jacksons constructive lives after they do their time. But looking back to those great expectations of 1995, the year he would win his House seat after another congressman's criminal conviction, the rest of us are left to marvel at little but the plunge:

The potential Supreme Court justice, or maybe president, instead is a convict and, soon enough, a federal prisoner.

ANOTHER VIEW



OTHER VIEW | MIAMI HERALD

Protecting the public's privacy

President Obama last week made welcome promises to bring transparency into the NSA's cyber-surveillance programs. What he failed to do, however, is promise to actually stop the NSA from snooping.

At times, it seemed that former constitutional law professor Barack Obama, champion of civil liberties, was engaged in a debate, right there on the White House podium, with President Obama, commander-in-chief and overseer of a vast security system with a wide reach into the private communications of Americans.

On the one hand, Mr. Obama expressed sympathy with Americans who fear "U.S.-Big Brother looking down on you, collecting telephone records, et cetera."

He proposed four initiatives to placate critics of the National Security Agency's extensive communications intercept programs.

First, he said, he would

pursue undefined "reforms" to Section 215 of the Patriot Act, which collects telephone records. He also promised to authorize a civil-liberties advocate before the secret court that approves warrants for intrusive actions; disclosed that NSA is creating a civil-liberties office; and said he would create a blue-ribbon panel to examine "our entire intelligence and communication technologies."

All of these are good ideas. But there was precious little indication of real and effective change in the programs that have raised all the privacy concerns. Facing a challenging question, Mr. Obama suddenly switched to his commander-in-chief hat:

"When I looked through specifically what was being done, my determination was that the two programs in particular that had been at issue, 215 and 702, offered valuable intelligence that helps us protect the American people,

and they're worth preserving," he said.

Bottom line: Expect more transparency in the cyber-surveillance programs, but don't expect any substantive changes.

Mr. Obama's soothing words are not going to satisfy anyone who fears the reach of the government's spying programs, nor should they.

The government wants the unqualified right to intercept all communications its computers can snare and examine all those believed to be suspicious - in secret, and apparently without regard to the Fourth Amendment's requirement of "probable cause."

That's the heart of the issue, and one Mr. Obama is apparently unwilling to touch. That leaves it up to Congress to go further.

One way would be to limit, or do away with altogether, the immunity that Congress itself granted to communications companies to protect them from

lawsuits by consumers who wanted their privacy safeguarded.

The result is that these companies have no incentive to refuse to comply with any government order, even one that might violate privacy rights.

Changing that would give the companies a stake in preserving the privacy of the public, which might make the government think twice before demanding private information it may not be entitled to.

The events of 9/11 made Americans more conscious about the need for security and protection against terrorism. But the 9/11 Commission warned of the need to safeguard civil liberties while protecting the homeland.

Today, when Americans have learned a lot about the extent of cyber-surveillance of their private communications, the commission's prescient warning is even more meaningful than it was a decade ago.

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