

Grins and groans

THE ISSUE | Grins and groans from news of the week.
OUR OPINION | Grin to David competing with Goliath. Groan to a blatant disregard for our natural resources.

Grin

They say in the business world, bigger is better. Apparently, the folks at the Elmira-Corning Regional Airport were absent the day that lesson was taught in business class.

According to a recent report, the airport earned \$1.54 billion in annual activity, third-highest in the state. Only LaGuardia and John F. International Airport brought in more money.

Believe it or not, the Big Flats airport and its three carriers – Delta, US Airways and Allegiant – outperformed larger airports in Buffalo, Rochester, Albany and Syracuse.

The airport also saw a gain of passengers from 2007-2009 at a time when overall air traffic was down. Enplanements increased sharply in 2009.

However, what's most impressive is the report said 3,377 jobs were tied directly or indirectly to the airport.

Good for them, and good for us.

Groan

Remember those campaign videos that Tom Reed shot prior to being elected to Congress?

The ones shot on Keuka Lake?

Those ads took on a whole new meaning as Reed and his fellow House Republicans voted this week to repeal the 1972 Clean Water Act.

House Bill 2018 would prevent the Environmental Protection Agency from enforcing clean water standards. Instead, that responsibility would fall to the states.

The purity of the Finger Lakes has never been in more danger. You have natural gas companies who, until recently, wanted to store fracking fluid in abandoned wells within a few miles of the Finger Lakes.

Inergy L.P. announced in January it was wanted to store natural gas in the salt caverns below Seneca Lake.

Of course, Reed has said time and again that the natural gas industry is safe and should be welcomed into the Finger Lakes region, so gutting the Clean Water Act is apparently no big deal.

And if something were to happen? Why, cash-strapped New York state would be in charge of both enforcement and any eventual cleanup.

Fortunately, the Republicans' unfunded mandate will never see the president's desk. Democrats in the Senate will kill the measure.

It just goes to illustrate, however, how much Republicans are willing to sell out to the gods of the Free Market System.

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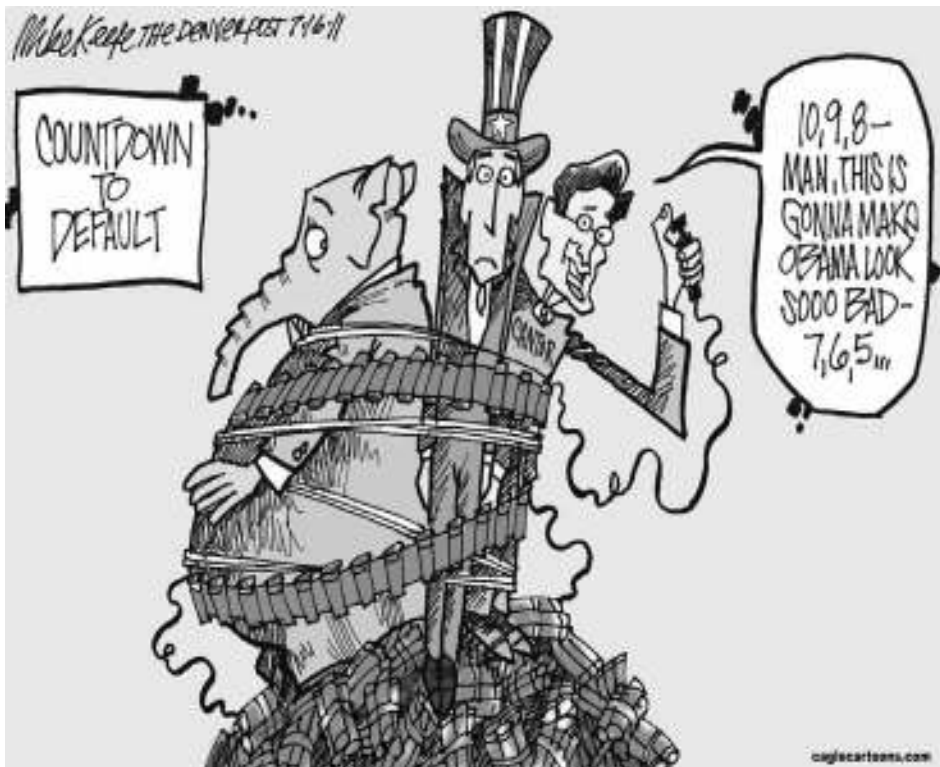
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ARTIST'S VIEW



COMMENTARY | STATE SEN. TOM O'MARA

System that keeps on giving

It's the system that keeps on giving. I'm referring again, of course, to New York State's Medicaid program – the massive, \$52-billion-plus health care delivery system that's long been plagued by abuse, fraud, and waste.

The latest alarm, from a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, highlights New York's ongoing and increasingly costly effort to modernize its Medicaid billing system. According to the WSJ report, "Over the past decade, the state has paid a Virginia-based IT company nearly \$1 billion to set up and operate a Medicaid billing and processing system hobbled by delays, cost overruns and programming flaws."

New York's Medicaid management information system, known as eMedNY, is the largest of its kind in the nation. It's intended to serve as Medicaid's operational base, if you will, for financial reporting, quality control measures, auditing and fraud prevention. In other words, it should function as the hub of New York's administrative oversight and, as such, it should be the place to ensure effectiveness and efficiency.

But it hasn't worked. According to one top state health official quoted in the article, "...eMedNY admittedly limits the state's ability to introduce programs that could help control fraud and abuse through better claims management." That speaks for itself. It also leaves me asking a few questions. For one, does the current system prevent the more widespread utilization of cutting-edge technology like that developed and fine-tuned by the Horseheads-based Salient Corporation? If it does, that has to change. The Salient technology can

work to prevent fraud, mismanagement and other waste.

For proof, we can look at its successful utilization right here in Chemung County. Salient is a key piece of Chemung's Medicaid managed care project, Priority Community Health Care, and it's already produced significant savings in its first year of operation. By having the right information in a timely manner physicians and staff can better identify the needs of patients and better oversee the system's utilization. Salient allows the clinic to see if patients have filled their prescriptions, received blood tests or x-rays, or visited a specialist they were referred to. With this information, Priority Community Health Care can assist their patients follow the directions that will help them stay healthy. That is the only way to really save money when it comes to health care.

But maybe most of all, the WSJ analysis begs this question: Why has the state tolerated, for so long, such a key oversight mechanism that clearly doesn't work? The state began looking for a replacement system in 2007 after numerous reports kept pinpointing these shortcomings. According to the state comptroller's office, state audits conducted between 2006 and 2010 revealed an alarming lack of oversight of Medicaid's payment functions and that eMedNY's failure to prevent billing mistakes resulted in more than \$450 million in overpayments.

All of this comes on the heels of a new study in Health Affairs showing that the nation's mid-Atlantic region, including New York, has the highest Medicaid spending in the nation – spending per

beneficiary was \$1,650 above the national average – with most of this overspending, in other important revelation, the result of overuse of medical services. That's a point that sometimes gets overlooked in the more dramatic and sensational reports of fraud. But overutilization, clearly a product of mismanagement, is a prime driver of unnecessary costs – and, again, it's exactly what Salient can address so effectively.

Which brings me back to the overall oversight of this sprawling and enormously expensive system. It's why the WSJ article remains so troubling. Governor Cuomo's administration remains committed to the change so clearly needed, but they cite the need to carefully consider the change in the context of New York's other evolving Medicaid reforms as part of this year's state budget. Fair enough. We need to get this right, but it's equally important to pay heed to the urgency to get it done.

On a related note, the governor recently nominated a new Medicaid Inspector General, thereby opening the door to a new era of combating Medicaid abuse, fraud and waste. We have to walk through that door. We're coming off a 2011 legislative session that's being recognized as productive in many key areas. But there's important work ahead. Just ask any local official about the ongoing burden of affording Medicaid and its impact on local property taxpayers. It's the single mandate that these officials pinpoint for reform, and it clearly deserves all of the priority attention we can give it.

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

Texting much worse than drunk driving

Halleluia! New York state has finally jumped on the bandwagon and declared texting while driving a primary crime.

New York was chicken when it originally addressed this problem because it

THE INSIDER passed a law that said that police could only ticket an offender if their vehicle was stopped for something else – like speeding. That is now no longer the case and it should never have been part of the equation.

If a cop sees you texting or talking on your cell phone, he can stop you right then and issue the appropriate ticket.

Presently, conviction will put two points on your driver's license. Gov. Andrew Cuomo plans to increase that to three points in the immediate future.

Cuomo considers texting and cell conversations to be among the most dangerous things a motorist can do, and I agree.

Indeed, texting, because of the amount of concentration it requires, is far more dangerous in many cases than mere drunk driving.

A person who imbibed too much still has the ability to know what's going on about him or her to some degree. Texting requires total concentration and gives no time for anything else.

With this legislation New York joins a majority of states which now to some degree condemn both practices, but there is still a lot of difference from state to state.

What is really needed is a federal standard applicable to everyone.

That would do away with the loopholes that currently exist from state to state.

...
The House of Representatives does not frequently do things good for the general populace, but it did last week when it rejected a bill that would have repealed a requirement for more efficient lighting – as in light bulbs.

That idea is not dead, however, because a majority of the House voted for a repeal and the measure only failed because a two-thirds majority was required.

Still available to opponents is a procedural gimmick that only requires a simple majority vote.

The count last week was 233 in favor and 193 against. So if House Republicans can move it into the simple majority status, the measure could be flushed.

The GOP argument was put succinctly by Texas Republican Joe Barton.

"Why in the world does the federal government have to tell the people what kind of light to use in their home?" he asked.

The idea of more energy-efficient lights was not the scheme of some oddball leftist. The law ordering a phase-out of the current fixtures was signed in 2007 by Republican President George W. Bush.

It would ban traditional incandescents over three years starting next Jan. 1 with 100-watt bulbs.

Similar regulations are already on the books in California. But the move to torpedo the change started in Texas.

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