

OPINION

LETTERS POLICY

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OUR VIEW

Time for state to allow medical marijuana

It was a bit surprising to see state Sen. Tom O'Mara — as a conservative Republican from the Southern Tier — voice support for the Compassionate Care Act, the comprehensive medical marijuana bill pending in the state Legislature, but we applaud him for it.

The Compassionate Care Act has passed the Assembly four times, but it has never gotten to a vote in the Senate, controlled by Republicans and the Independent Democratic Conference. The bill has been opposed by Senate Republican Leader Dean Skelos, who can block a vote, but Skelos has reportedly softened his stance.

O'Mara is at least the fourth Republican senator from upstate New York to voice support, so if it got to the floor, it could pass.

The bill sets up a system under which medical marijuana would be tightly regulated and available to patients with serious illnesses and debilitating conditions, including cancer, HIV/AIDS, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, Crohn's disease and PTSD.

Sales would be taxed, with revenues going to the state and local municipalities. The state Assembly estimates annual revenues at

\$66 million.

There is support in the medical community and among patient/caregiver advocacy groups, and polls shows New Yorkers are overwhelmingly in favor. It's allowed in 20 states plus Washington D.C. already, with legislation or ballot measures pending in 15 more.

The state Assembly included the Compassionate Care Act in its budget proposal this week, although the Senate did not. If it's not included in the final budget agreement, it's possible the Legislature could take up the matter after budget season.

If not, Cuomo plans to use an executive action to allow up to 20 hospitals in New York to prescribe medical marijuana under a 1980 law that allows drugs to be prescribed for research purposes. Advocates, though, say Cuomo's plan is flawed and too limited.

We feel the benefits for patients outweigh the concerns, primarily that it would lead to increased recreational abuse.

It's time to move forward, while continuing to enforce existing laws, with a particular focus on keeping marijuana away from children and keeping roadways safe.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Reed backs delay for inspections

TO THE EDITOR | Dairy farmers across New York are gearing up for what will be a brand new experience. The federal government is scheduled to start a different set of safety inspections on some dairy farms this summer. Farmers take this issue very seriously, wanting the safest possible workplace for their families, their employees, and themselves.

Because of this, New York Farm Bureau and a number of its agricultural partners have been working hard to educate farmers on how to prepare for these inspections. However, there is a hurdle standing in the way. The farms are still waiting for clarification from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) on a number of issues they will be evaluating.

Exact standards are not

available for dairies like they are for constructions sites and manufacturers. So what should farmers go by in determining best safety practices on the farm? It is important that they have clear directions on how to prepare before the site visits begin. Representative Tom Reed has been part of a bipartisan effort asking OSHA for a delay in its timetable. This is not meant to stop the inspections, but rather to ensure everyone is on the same page.

New York Farm Bureau appreciates Rep. Reed's common sense approach to finding a reasonable solution to this issue to effectively protect everyone on the farm. The information just needs to be clear from the get go about how the federal inspection process will work.

Dean Norton,
president,
New York Farm Bureau,
Elba

POLITICS | TOM O'MARA

A toast to farming's future

Everyone's Irish on St. Patrick's Day, it's said, and while I'm more than proud to welcome one and all to the annual celebration of everything Irish this time of year, I'll also go ahead and stretch the celebration to cover things green in government too. Green, in this sense, meaning agriculture.

Let me explain.

Last year, the Senate advanced what we called "Grown in New York," a comprehensive tax and regulatory reform strategy with a straightforward goal: to make sure that New York State doesn't tax, regulate or price our farmers out of business. One of Grown in New York's key planks became law in 2013 and placed a 2% cap on annual agricultural land assessment increases, a priority of individual farmers and agricultural advocates who have long noted that our farmers fight to survive under the nation's second-highest property tax burden.

So it was about time we took this action, and we continue to work to enact other provisions of Grown in New York. We're hopeful that they'll help the next generation of family farmers grow, prosper and stay competitive. Earlier this month we were joined in this tax and regulatory reform effort by Governor Andrew Cuomo's creation of the state's first-ever interagency task force on agriculture, known as the Strategic Interagency Task Force on Lessening



SEN. TOM O'MARA

Obstacles to Agriculture (SILO), to ensure that "state agencies that deal with farmers are communicating regularly, interacting efficiently and lessening regulations on farms."

But the Senate this year is also taking direct aim at farming's next generation by zeroing in on this fact: the average age of farmers in New York is approximately 57 years old. A growing percentage of all farmers are aged 65 and above. The state's aging farmer population poses one of the most serious threats to the future of New York's family farms.

It's true nationally as well. In 2012, United States Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack stated a national goal of attracting 100,000 new farmers in five years, saying in an interview, "Over 30 percent of the current farm population is over the age of 65. We have a whole generation that is set to retire. The question is then who will take over those operations. We need generations of leaders in American agriculture to continue our position as the number one agricultural country in the world."

If New York's going to remain one of America's

prominent agricultural states, we need to address the same challenge. So to encourage younger people who want to pursue farming careers, we've recently developed a legislative program called "Young Farmers NY" that we're pushing to have included as part of this year's state budget, and that the Senate approved late last week as part of our one-house budget resolution. Our strategy blends tax incentives, low-interest loans and grants, a new student loan forgiveness program and other educational initiatives to help existing young farmers stay on the land and encourage more young people to consider careers in agriculture. Specific provisions include:

■ A Farm Preservation Tax Credit of up to 10 percent for farmers who sell or lease land or equipment to a new farmer.

■ A Young Farmer Revolving Loan Fund to provide low-interest, start-up loans for land and equipment purchases by new farmers.

■ Farm Savings Accounts to allow first-time farmers to establish special, tax-free savings accounts that can be used for purchasing a farm or meeting other farm-related expenses.

■ Estate tax reform to help keep generations-old farms in the family and to try to help prevent farmers from having to make the unfair choice of subdividing or selling off farmland in order to pay tax bills.

■ A Young Farmer

Student Loan Forgiveness Program for students who earn an agricultural degree from a State University of New York (SUNY) college or university, including the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University, and work in New York State agriculture for at least five years after they graduate.

■ A Young Farmer Apprenticeship Program, in partnership with local BOCES and the New York Farm Bureau, to provide hands-on training opportunities for young farmers under the guidance of experienced farmers; and

■ Increased state support for the highly successful Future Farmers of America (FFA) in-school program to encourage high school students in rural communities to explore agriculture-related career opportunities.

You can read more about the Senate's "Young Farmers NY" plan on my Senate website, www.omara.nysenate.gov.

So here's to all of you on St. Patrick's Day.

And here's to the health and a future of greener pastures, as well, for New York state's farmers, who carry on an important way of life, anchor countless communities and industries, and provide good livelihoods for thousands of New Yorkers.

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.

ANOTHER VIEW



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

We would like to take the time to say thank you so very much for the valiant efforts of the staff, especially the manager and assistant manager of Bob Evans Restaurant in Riverside on Valentine's night.

Our parents were enjoying their special day like so many other people that day. They were getting ready to leave and Dad said he needed to use the restroom.

Things went downhill from there.

The manager and assistant manager called 911 and the assistant manager performed CPR on Dad until the paramedics and ambulance came. We

received a call telling us to get to Bob Evans immediately - we live 15 miles away.

We started for Bob Evans but trying to think I called our mom's cell, she answered her phone but with all going on around her and her observing what was happening with her husband she handed the phone to someone she did not know but was trying to comfort her.

It happened to be someone I have known, who was my sister's sister-in-law and husband, Betty Lou and Dick Swan.

They promised to stay with Mom and even drive her to the hospital and would meet us there.

Thank you, Betty Lou and Dick, Rural Metro, Corning Hospital emergency room staff, Bob Evans staff.

Now ... shame on you, to the patrons of Bob Evans who were there that night then came back the next day and days after and complained to the staff and other patrons about all the commotion and upset they went through that night. Shame on you!

If this had been your family, what would you have done and how would you feel?

Unfortunately, Dad did not survive, despite all the valiant efforts of Bob Evans, Rural Metro and Corning Hospital ER staff.

Thank you so very much to Dick and Betty Lou Swan and Frank Edger. Thank you, too, for your kindness and comfort that you gave Mom.

Thank you to the residents of Colonial Square Apartments in Gang Mills. As a family we thought the move to your complex was the right place and time for our parents, now we know it was, the love, comfort and kindness shown to our family just reinforced that our parents were a real part of your community. We know that Mom will be well cared for in our absence.

Mark and Elaine Studley
Lindley

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