

Grins and groans

Kudos to Spencer Crest Nature Center's recent merger with Corning Community College, celebrated last week with a ribbon cutting and other festivities.

The move should give the nature center's board more support and resources, which will help in terms of the programs it offers.

It also makes CCC the only community college in New York State that features a nature center.

While Spencer Crest had always been its own entity until the recent merger, it's always had close ties to CCC.

Spencer Crest began way back in the 1960s as the brainchild of CCC biology professors Jack Wills and John Brennan, who carved out some nature trails adjacent to the Spencer Hill campus to use for outdoor education.

But it really took off in the mid-1970s, when the Corning Rotary Club spearheaded a drive for a community nature center, in conjunction with CCC. There was also support from Corning Inc. and the Corning-Painted Post School District, who provided 100 acres of land apiece through a donation and a long-term lease, respectively.

The trail network was developed first, and then the nature center building itself opened in 1981.

Now, Spencer Crest features seven miles of scenic trails on 250 acres, with two ponds, a stream and several different forest zones. There's also a gazebo overlooking a meadow, and a wheelchair-accessible boardwalk loop through the woods called the Sensitivity Trail.

The museum has many displays on plants, wildlife, geology and other topics.

Spencer Crest has long been popular with local elementary schools, who bring up their students for field trips. Many area residents hike there frequently – and the fact that it's dog-friendly is a big plus.

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There are a lot of good kids doing good things in our community, and that includes the Student Council at West High. The students are seeking donations of new and gently used clothes, toys, books, games and household items to be given away as part of Project ReachOut.

Residents can stop by and take items they need from 8 a.m.-noon Nov. 19 in the West High cafeteria.

This is the third year the council has held Project ReachOut, and there is always a big response, especially from families who cannot afford Christmas presents.

Families have thanked the Student Council for "saving Christmas," said Council President Katie Cervoni.

We thank the council, too. It takes a lot of hard work and time to collect the items and get them ready. Then, students set up, run the event and then clean up when it's over.

To donate to this good cause, contact Lori Pruyn at 936-3794 or at lpruyn@coppmail.com. "It's inspiring to see how a lot of little actions – people bringing things in, donating things, helping with the event – all come together to make a big difference," said Council Vice President Bethany Rudolph.

We agree. Great job, everyone!

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It's starting to feel a lot like Christmas. But it's only Halloween!

We know it's the end of October, and expect the temperatures to be a bit on the cool side.

But snow? No! While we didn't get the storm that hit our friends in the Northeast, it's still nasty out. We aren't ready for temperatures in the 30s.

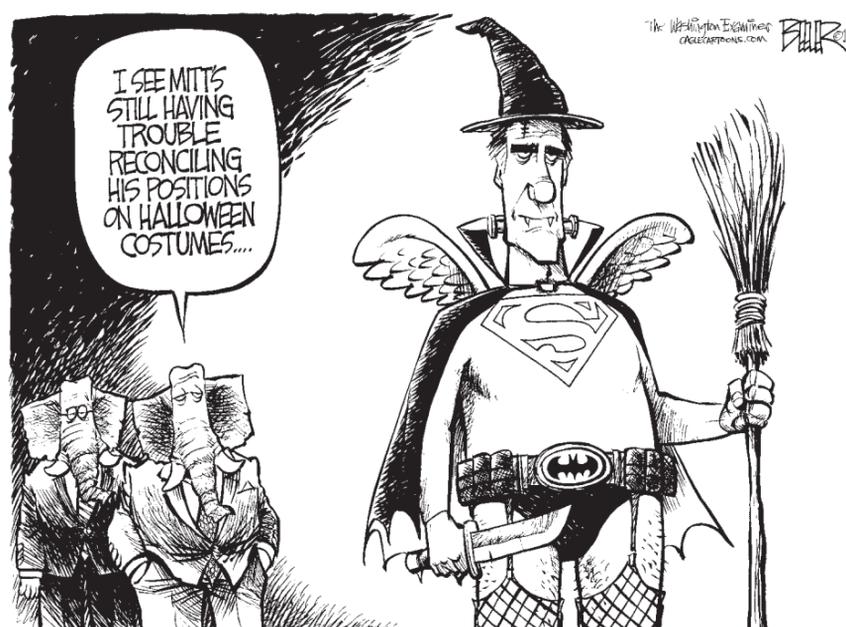
It's unfortunate, but many children will have to cover their bright costumes with winter coats and wear hats and mittens for tonight's trick or treating. That's no fun at all.

The holiday displays already up in stores must have confused Mother Nature.

And we all know it's not nice to fool Mother Nature!

Guess the joke's on us.

ARTIST'S VIEW



COMMENTARY | SEN. TOM O'MARA

The table of economic competition

Anyone who's ever watched ESPN's "World Series of Poker" realizes pretty quickly that the world's best card players bring to the table an impressive mix of calculation, character and good luck.

Let's stretch the analogy to New York state's current place at the table of national and global economic competition. One thing we know for sure is that we're sitting at a table with some of the world's smartest, most savvy competitors. So we better be on our game. In many ways, we are. In fact we hold a pretty impressive pile of chips – natural resources, world class colleges and universities, a high-quality work force, an impressive foundation of industries, Fortune 500 corporations, and so many other building blocks of success.

But New York's also holding a full house of challenges – Medicaid reform, mandate relief, high taxes, onerous regulations and the dealer just turned over one more card that I'll focus on shortly. If New York plays this hand right (translated: if we address these challenges head on), the odds are that we stand to win a table full of economic opportunities and stronger communities. But if we hold on to this hand for too long, or play it wrong, we're facing a long string of missed chances and a pocketful of "what could have beens."

We've devoted a lot of time, effort and resources in 2011 to putting in place an economic and fiscal reform agenda that promises to help us play the hand we've been dealt effectively – Medicaid redesign, as well as structures for meaningful mandate relief, lower taxes and fewer regulations. But we can't forget my earlier point that another, far less noticed card still

waits to be turned over: high debt.

This issue of state debt has been brought to the forefront by a just-released report from a group known as State Budget Solutions, a government reform group focused on state governments. The organization's second annual report sounds a few alarms. First: the aggregate debt of all of America's 50 states is more than \$4 trillion, up from \$1.7 trillion just over 15 months ago in July 2010. In other words, state debt across the nation is on a rapid ascent. Read the report online at www.statebudgetsolutions.org.

"These deficit numbers are staggering and should be frightening to the American public. Due to budget gimmicks, many states fail to give an adequate picture of how much trouble they are really in," the group's president said. "This report makes it clear that if legislators don't act immediately and decisively, our country will be facing a budget crisis that we have never seen before."

California has the largest debt – \$117.4 billion or a little over \$3,000 per capita. Second highest? I'm sure most of you guessed right: New York. The Empire State's debt is \$55.2 billion, or \$2,829 per person. Rounding out the top five states with the highest debt load are Texas, New Jersey and Illinois, respectively.

Not a dose of good news by any means, but maybe the kind of straight up, stark, sober look in the eye that any state with a bad spending habit needs. And lending further credence to the warning are similar findings from the New York State comptroller's office in its 2011 Financial Condition Report. There it is again, on pages 18-19. New York state

was the second-most indebted state in America in 2010. New York's "state-funded debt outstanding per person was \$3,184" as of this past March. And "debt service is among the fastest growing categories" of the state budget. Find the comptroller's report at www.osc.state.ny.us.

Just like any family facing a debt crisis, governments facing large debts, like New York, face limited choices. The resources being gobbled up to pay back debt diminish the ability to invest (or reinvest) in economic growth. It limits the ability to undertake badly needed initiatives, programs, projects or services. It makes it harder to respond to unexpected crises. I noted in this column just last week, for example, that more money from the state's dedicated highway and bridge trust fund goes toward paying the debt on old road projects than on badly needed new ones.

Getting off the high-debt list must be in the cards for New York, too.

This year's state budget cut state spending and didn't authorize any new state borrowing. That's a start and it points us in the right way, but make no mistake that the political pressure's going to build next year to restore spending that was cut – and even increase spending yet again.

So we need to remember that every New Yorker today is on the hook for approximately \$3,000 because of existing state debt. And until we start to reduce this debt and, someday, get out from under it, we simply can't expect to walk away from the table of economic competition as a champion of economic growth and private-sector job creation.

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

Need to be proactive to prevent fracking

As one who used to spend summers at Keuka Lake, I applaud Dr. Al Wahlig of Hammondsport for his recent letter to the editor in this newspaper.

Al, a Bath native like yours truly, wants to establish a 4,000-foot non-gas drilling buffer zone around the whole Keuka Lake watershed.

He says the action would "almost

assure that accidental spills from trucks, settling ponds, leaking storage tanks or other fracking activities would not contaminate Keuka Lake or the watershed."

Al's suggestion is an excellent one that I would hope the local legislative leaders would quickly adopt.

Hydrofracking activities have begun by the hundreds in adjacent areas of Pennsylvania and the same will happen here if and when New York state lifts its current ban on the process.

State regulations could provide the protection Wahlig seeks but I'd rather also see local bans just to be certain.

The state DEC is very close to finally allowing fracking in New York. Before that decision is made, it's time to put protection in place around any area that's liable to be threatened.

There is a strong anti-fracking coalition active around Seneca Lake. Something similar is needed to protect Keuka.

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I see where Tom Reed wants to be sure that America and Iraq remain friendly despite the impending pullout of U.S. troops.

The Republican would like to require that the views of military advisers play a primary role in decisions affecting that country's future.

"If they say it requires the presence of troops, then that's what should be done."

President Obama has fulfilled another campaign promise by having U.S. forces out of Iraq by the end of this year.

I know there are many who criticize him because he was unable to negotiate a deal with Iraqi authorities that would have guaranteed Americans could not be prosecuted in an Iraqi court for any violation that occurred in that country.

But it was the Iraqis who resisted this necessary provision and not the United States.

Obama, therefore, had to pull the plug and he has done so. His next step should be the rapid removal of U.S. troops from neighboring Afghanistan.

That nation's president Hamid Karzai has become increasingly less supportive of American efforts to help his people.

If that is his position,

SEE ROLFE | 5A

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