

OPINION

COMMENTARY | STATE SEN. TOM O'MARA, R-BIG FLATS

How to waste millions of taxpayer dollars

Add the following issue to the agenda needing attention when the Legislature convenes next week – although it's never dropped off my own list of priorities.

At the beginning of the Cuomo administration, New York State began shifting the management of what is known as "Non-Emergency Medicaid Transportation," or NEMT, from localities which operate our public transit systems to the state Department of Health (DOH). The change has been touted as a cost-cutting move by DOH, however many local public transportation leaders from the Southern Tier, Finger Lakes, and throughout upstate have continually raised concerns about its implementation and long-term impact on rural communities and populations including the rural poor, disabled veterans, the elderly, and the rural workforce. I know because I have held numerous meetings and forums over the past several years to hear directly from local officials, mobility managers, transportation providers, and community organizations.

It's been an ongoing concern. Legislation I've sponsored has consistently, nearly unanimously been approved by both houses of the Legislature, only to be vetoed time after time by the governor. This year's legislation (S2083/A7074) would have established an "Upstate Transit Funding Board" dedicated to this challenge and paying consistent attention to the impact of NEMT management. We have not been crying wolf. A state comptroller's audit released on December 15 shows that the state DOH move to centralize NEMT management has been inefficient and unacceptably wasteful of taxpayer dollars.

Let's hope someone listens now. Even so, it is outrageous that it takes a comptroller's audit to uncover, after the fact, what many upstate, rural public transit leaders have been warning about for years. According to the audit, the DOH contracted with two companies to take over from individual localities the management of NEMT. The state reimbursed these companies approximately \$180 million over three years from January 1, 2013 to December 31, 2016. However, according to auditors, DOH overpaid the companies

more than \$6.2 million for transportation management services for individuals who were not eligible for them. Among other findings, the audit also cites one provider of taxi services that did not produce documentation supporting reimbursement claims totaling roughly \$2.4 million. Yes, you read that right – taxi service – which is what these state-appointed companies have been utilizing all too often instead of our local public transit services. This shift of NEMT riders from public transit to private taxis has resulted in a significant loss of ridership on public transit, thereby creating an imbalance in the funding to sustain the public transit systems. The comptroller says that the DOH, in response to the audit, is already making changes expected to save \$7.6 million in the future and will attempt to recoup the overpayments. But the damage has been done. DOH's one-size-fits-all approach has already put local public transit providers out of business, in Tioga County for example, while others remain at risk and have cut back routes and other services to the general rural population.

It has been a disaster and it can't go on. Following the comptroller's audit, I have called on Governor Cuomo to investigate the DOH's management of NEMT. In my view, this audit demonstrates that the DOH should not be allowed to continue this failed experiment in Medicaid management. I am exploring legislation to rescind the department's authority to manage NEMT and return that responsibility to the local level. The millions of taxpayer dollars wasted could have and should have been put to use that is much more effective. We need to ensure the long-term operation and viability of public transportation systems throughout upstate, rural New York. These systems provide critical links for thousands upon thousands of upstate residents and their jobs, medical appointments, schools, shopping, and other destinations. Public transit is also a cornerstone of the regional transportation systems vital to economic development, job growth, anti-poverty and housing initiatives, energy and environmental conservation. The full audit can be viewed on the comptroller's website, www.osc.state.ny.us.

SHAWN VARGO | FROM THE EDITOR

Best wishes this holiday season



Shawn Vargo

When this newspaper gets thrown on your porch, it will be December 24, also known as Christmas Eve throughout the land. Regardless of your particular faith, I would like to extend the most sincere wishes for a happy holiday season for you and your family – from myself and everyone here at The Leader.

Please do not lump me in

with Facebook yahoos that demand that I say Merry Christmas – because that is what they want to hear. The message should be understood if that's what's going on at your house.

As a matter of fact, the Vargos will be waking up Monday morning to celebrate Christmas.

I am also fully aware that folks have completed the celebration of Hanukkah, while Kwanzaa is set to begin on Tuesday. Meanwhile, there are some that do not partake in any of the aforementioned holidays and are forced to be wished a happy holidays for no particular reason.

But I digress (a subtle shout-out to former Leader

employee Chris Gill and his family). I would also like to throw out a sincere wish that wherever you are and whatever you are doing over the next several days, you be able to enjoy yourself, as well as family and friends – which I feel is much more meaningful than the exchange of presents in the long run.

May the overly-politically-charged environment that we currently reside in, take a short rest so all can enjoy the holidays. There are plenty of days between now and the mid-term elections to support your way of thought.

My favorite holiday story is the Christmas Truce of World War I, in which

German and English soldiers stopped fighting for one day in 1914 to sing, drink and even play a soccer match.

I mean, if a hiatus can be called to the fighting in the Great War, families should be able to enjoy some egg nog without proclaiming the damnation of the country by one side or the other.

Speaking of egg nog... I am reminded that we are out, so I will close this by saying be safe and enjoy the next several days.

By the way, if you are playing for your league's fantasy football championship, best of luck there, too.

Shawn Vargo is the executive editor and can be reached at svargo@the-leader.com.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

If you're going to drink, please be responsible

To the Editor,
The holidays are a time to surround yourself with family and friends, eat seasonal treats and toast to what's to come. Help keep the celebrations going and care about the safety of your family, friends and community this holiday season.

If you choose to celebrate the holidays with a "cheers," always remember to drink responsibly and plan ahead to use a cab/uber/lyft, designated driver or public transportation to get to and from your destination safely.

Drunk driving is 100 percent preventable and it's up to you to do your part this holiday season to keep the Southern Tier's roads safe. That's why we're joining Budweiser to celebrate the holidays by reminding everyone to plan ahead for a safe ride home from his or her holiday celebrations.

Each Thursday at 2 p.m. ET this holiday season, new and existing Lyft users over the age of 21 can access a unique code through the Budweiser Facebook page to claim a \$20 ride credit that can be used for rides taken from 5 p.m. until 5 a.m. local time that Thursday, Friday, or Saturday night.

Please, be patient this season with restaurants, bars and stores when they ask for your ID. With family coming

home from college, the military, etc establishments are doing what they need to do to keep everyone safe and take it as a compliment that you look fantastic for whatever age you are!

Over the past 35 years, Anheuser-Busch and its wholesaler partners have invested more than \$1 billion in the United States to promote alcohol responsibility and reduce drunk driving, and we are looking forward to continuing this effort through 2018 and beyond. Remember that you matter to someone, as does everyone on the road. Get home safely this holiday season.

As always, thank you for your business and from everyone at Seneca Beverage Corporation, we wish you a happy and safe holiday season!

Sincerely,
Betsy Potter
Better World Manager
Seneca Beverage Corporation

Wreaths Across America Day a big success

To the Editor,
This year's Wreaths Across America Day held on December 16th in the Bath National Cemetery was an overwhelming success. Our goal this year was 2,500 wreaths. But energetic and excited volunteers had the opportunity to lay nearly 3,300 wreaths.

The Bath Wreaths Across America (WAA) committee wishes to

express our sincere thanks to The Leader and associated publications, and WETM-TV for their excellent coverage leading up to the event and "day-of" coverage.

A big "thank you" also goes out to all the volunteers, both "day of" and those behind the scenes, who devoted much time and effort. There were many individuals and groups involved – too many to mention in this letter – that helped bring the event to fruition.

The many children that attended had the opportunity to learn of the sacrifices made by the area's service men and woman who have given the ultimate sacrifice – their lives – to keep our country free and safe. WAA Day helps all of us to never forget that the freedoms we enjoy came at such a great cost.

In addition to the Bath National Cemetery and Woodlawn National Cemetery in Elmira, WAA is carried out through coordinated wreath-laying ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery and over 1,200 locations in all 50 states of our great country. The WAA mission is to Remember, Honor and Teach.

So make plans to be part of this great event next December 15th and be sure to sponsor a wreath or two. You can do this anytime at www.WreathsAcrossAmerica-BathNY.org (include the dash).

National Cemetery, Wreaths Across America Committee Member

I commend C-PP for its efforts

To the Editor,
I am writing to applaud the recent efforts from the CPP School District's professional development and awareness campaign led by Superintendent Michael Ginals, which aims to address OUR school youth's mental health-related issues.

As a former counselor and now Life Coach, who has worked in Corning for over 30 years, I can attest to the fact that mental health issues are often overlooked and not recognized due to a lack of understanding and education; there also is the associated stigma, resulting in many suffering unnecessarily in isolation.


CPP is now taking a courageous and much-needed stance by acknowledging that there are many young individuals struggling with sadness, anxiety and depression and even drug use. It is very real.

Our culture is so competitive; students may not thrive and meet their potential if their issues are not dealt with. Many young people not only are isolated, they lack healthy self-images and have many competing social pressures. Many then go on to college and continue to struggle.

According to a 2015 Annual Survey report from The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Report, anxiety continues to be the most predominant and increasing concern among college students (47.3%), followed by depression (40.1%), relationship concerns (32.5%), suicidal ideation (20.2%), self-injury (12.8%) and alcohol abuse (10.6%).
Mental Health

See LETTERS, A5

Tom Doud
Bath



The LEADER

STAFF BOX

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STUFFY	DEARLY	GLOSSY

Santa could see the pride his helpers took in their work. It was clear by their —

HIGH "ELF"-ESTEEM