



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

## Senator Martins: Untangling Mandate Relief

JACK M. MARTINS January 3, 2012

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I love the holiday season but like many of you, there are some time-consuming, tedious aspects that I can do without. Shopping is definitely not my bag but, more than anything else, the jumble of lights that patiently waits for me in the attic, tangled beyond recognition, is what annually unsettles me. Regardless, I have been officially designated the master de-tangler of all twisted strands in our household, and it's a title I hold proudly.

As I sit down with a cup of coffee to contemplate my approach, they seem as great a hassle as any obstacle I routinely face in Albany and I usually spend several hours procrastinating, asking myself why I didn't take more care in putting them away. I know that I could simply throw them all away and buy new ones but I resist the temptation as I know full-well the problem will recreate itself next holiday season. No, there's nothing to it but to put on some holiday music and begin the task of patient untangling, testing strands and bulbs as I go. Some things are tedious and just take time.

I share this with you in light of some recent discussions I've had with colleagues in government about their perceived lack of true mandate relief this past year. The most recent report on our efforts shows that our first set of initiatives made in 2011 will result in approximately \$250 million in annual savings. Understandably, some feel that wasn't enough

in terms of savings to help local governments and schools meet the soon-to-be implemented tax cap.

They remind us that the most significant savings would be seen by the wholesale dismantling of mandates governing the state's pension and Medicaid systems. This is obviously true but what critics fail to recognize is that all mandates, not just the large ones, have their own value and most notably, their own supporters. If you were to attack special-education mandates, you would certainly be opposed by both parents and advocates who would have legitimate and worthy counter-arguments to disenfranchising those students. Naturally, the same can be said for any of the various interests surrounding entitlement reform. What we have been able to do thus far, is to bring parties to the table to discuss alternatives and to hammer out adjustments rather than force a digging in of heels which damages any progress at all.

My point is that none of this is quick or easy. Each mandate was enacted for a reason and a haphazard approach to reforming them would likely lead to damage that would ultimately have to be repaired somewhere down the line. Much like the tangled light strands, it makes no sense to throw them all out without examining them. One by one, each has to be studied, discussed and eventually weighed against our larger need to rein in and prioritize state spending. In some cases a mandate goes to the trash. In others, we are able to eliminate the regulations that stifle flexibility, open the doors to consolidation and ultimately achieve the goal the mandate was designed to reach. We have been able to eliminate unnecessary paperwork, lower the cost of public safety and transportation costs and found ways to reduce expenses for our social service agencies. You may even recall earlier newspaper accounts that hailed our authorizing school districts to change bus service guidelines, saving hundreds of thousands of dollars for our local school districts.

As we continue our efforts, I have been appointed by the Senate to the newly created Mandate Relief Council. Early in this legislative session, my colleagues and I on the council will meet to inaugurate this year's work and to craft the numerous measures that will deliver millions more in savings. It is tedious work but if continued with the rate of success we had this year, it could reward taxpayers with hundreds of millions of dollars in relief from local property taxes annually. Despite the usual Monday morning quarterbacks and naysayers, I remain hopeful. We have reason to be. Fortunately, I expect that my council colleagues to appreciate the rewards of untangling lights just as much as I do.