



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

O'Mara's legislation creating an 'Upstate Transit Funding Board' delivered to governor: Legislation to ensure long-term viability of public transit systems has been an O'Mara priority for several years

THOMAS F. O'MARA November 22, 2016

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For thousands upon thousands of Upstate residents, these systems provide critical links to jobs, medical appointments, school, shopping destinations, and other necessities. Our public transit systems also stand as cornerstones of regional transportation systems vital to economic development, job growth, anti-poverty and housing initiatives, energy and environmental conservation.

Albany, N.Y., November 22—Legislation sponsored by State Senator Tom O’Mara (R,C,I-Big Flats) to establish a new "Upstate Transit Funding Board" within the state the Department of Transportation (DOT) has been delivered to Governor Andrew Cuomo for final action.

O’Mara, who has been at the forefront of this critical issue for the future of rural public transportation, urged Cuomo to sign the legislation ([S8045/A8202](#)) into law.

“We need to take steps to ensure the long-term operation and viability of public transportation systems throughout the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions, and across upstate New York,” said O’Mara, a member of the Senate Transportation Committee, as well as the joint, bipartisan Commission on Rural Resources. “For thousands upon thousands of Upstate residents, these systems provide critical links to jobs, medical appointments, school, shopping destinations, and other necessities. Our public transit systems also stand as cornerstones of regional transportation systems vital to economic development, job growth, anti-poverty and housing initiatives, energy and environmental conservation.”

The legislation is sponsored in the Assembly by Assemblyman Anthony Brindisi (D-Utica). In June, the measure was unanimously approved in the Senate and by a vote of 134-2 in the Assembly.

O’Mara and other supporters stress that fares alone are not sufficient to cover all the costs of providing public transit services and the systems must rely on annual state funding. He said that this legislation creating an Upstate Transit Funding Board would ensure that discussions remain ongoing to continually identify sustainable funding options to provide for growth and stability in public transportation operating assistance and create additional opportunities for supporting mobility options for Upstate New York residents.

The future of Upstate public transit systems has been an O'Mara priority over the past several years, particularly since the state's ongoing Medicaid redesign strategy has included a shift over the past three years in the administration and management of Medicaid Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) from localities to the state. It's been viewed as a cost-cutting move by state officials, but a number of local public transportation officials from O'Mara's district and across the Upstate region have continued to raise concerns about the plan and, especially, its long-term impact on rural communities and populations, including the disabled, elderly and the rural workforce.

"The Medicaid redesign effort in Non-Emergency Medical Transportation has resulted in a significant shift in public transportation services in many areas – from public transit buses to private taxi service -- but especially in rural, Upstate regions," said O'Mara. "The future of public transportation in our rural, Upstate regions is being put at risk by Albany's ongoing attempt to impose a statewide, one-size-fits-all approach to these local systems. It remains a developing crisis for many rural residents. So we keep trying to bring more widespread attention to the changes underway, fully assess the consequences for our counties and do what we can to ensure that the impact on rural, Upstate public transportation at least receives a full and a fair hearing."

Over the past few years, O'Mara has held numerous meetings and forums, **including a public roundtable in Cooperstown last July** to hear from local officials, mobility managers, transportation providers and community organizations in Upstate rural regions who say that the new, one-size-fits-all approach, which might be workable in suburban and urban areas downstate, isn't proving cost-effective or efficient in their rural communities. At the forums, officials from numerous counties, including all of the counties O'Mara represents as part of the 58th Senate District (Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben, Tompkins and Yates) have highlighted the shortcomings of the new system, including the elimination of existing

transportation routes, the future of locally based cost-efficiency initiatives and the overall disruption of services to persons with disabilities, seniors and other local residents who have long depended on these rural public transportation systems.

Those interested in contacting the governor to urge him to sign the legislation into law can do so by e-mail at: <http://www.governor.ny.gov/content/governor-contact-form>. Or contact the governor's office by phone at 518-474-8390.