



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Southern Tier's state lawmakers urge Cuomo to let local leaders decide on in-person graduations: O'Mara, Palmesano and Friend continue to call on governor to recognize importance of this year's ceremonies

THOMAS F. O'MARA June 16, 2020

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We fully agree with our local educators and leaders. In our view, the state can and should trust these regional officials to conduct safe in-person graduation ceremonies as they see fit while fully adhering to all of the fundamental distancing and other safety guidelines and recommendations. In fact, we could not agree more that our local decision makers have proven themselves fully up to this task of responding to COVID-19 and are fully capable of exercising graduation planning

and oversight.

**Elmira, N.Y., June 16**—State Senator Tom O'Mara (R,C,I-Big Flats), Assemblyman Phil Palmesano (R,C,I-Corning) and Assemblyman Chris Friend (R,C,I-Big Flats) continued today to call on Governor Andrew Cuomo to let the Southern Tier's local officials make the decision on how to conduct in-person high school graduation ceremonies for this year's graduating seniors.

In a letter to the governor, O'Mara, Palmesano and Friend wrote, "As you know, local government leaders and school district administrators from across the Southern Tier region have recently requested that you allow them to exercise local decision making regarding the size of regional, in-person high school graduation ceremonies. We fully agree with our local educators and leaders. In our view, the state can and should trust these regional officials to conduct safe in-person graduation ceremonies as they see fit while fully adhering to all of the fundamental distancing and other safety guidelines and recommendations. In fact, we could not agree more that our local decision makers have proven themselves fully up to this task of responding to COVID-19 and are fully capable of exercising graduation planning and oversight...Furthermore, if dining indoors at restaurants at 50% capacity with no masks and peaceful protests en masse with no social distancing are being permitted, it seems reasonable as well that our schools can safely conduct an outdoor graduation ceremony with recommended physical distancing and other safety guidelines."

[see above attached copy of today's letter]

The lawmakers urged Cuomo to immediately revise the state-mandated size limit for in-person high school graduation ceremonies. In early June, the governor issued an executive order limiting in-person graduation ceremonies to no more than a total of 150 attendees.

Over the past several days, local officials and school district administrators from across the Southern Tier have stressed that this state-mandated restriction leaves many school districts unable to conduct a collective gathering for their entire graduating school community.

They argue that they can plan and conduct in-person ceremonies that fully involve graduating seniors and their families while completely adhering to the necessary safety recommendations for physical distancing and other precautions.

For example, in a letter this week to the Horseheads Central School District community, Superintendent Tom Douglas wrote, “Our senior class is over 300 students. In order to meet that requirement and include parents and personnel to help us adhere to safety guidelines and run graduation, we would need several ceremonies. To date (Governor Cuomo) has not changed this arbitrary number not based on fact or data. He has allowed gatherings for other events and activities such as beaches and big box stores at 25% of the location’s capacity. We believe we can hold graduation safely using this guideline, but unless and until the governor changes his 150 limit, we are unable to hold one in-person graduation ceremony for this very special Class of 2020...Urge (Governor Cuomo) to increase the number of attendees at in-person graduation ceremonies using the same percentage limits being used for other gatherings at beaches, big box stores (Walmart, Lowes, Home Depot) and Grocery stores: 25% or more of the actual venue’s capacity. If this reasonable request were granted, almost all districts in the state could hold one graduation ceremony that includes all graduates, two parents/guests, and the necessary staff on their football fields and meet social distancing requirements.”

Last Friday, county executives and county managers from across the Southern Tier region – including Chemung County Executive Christopher Moss, Steuben County Manager Jack Wheeler, and Schuyler County Administrator Timothy O’Hearn – also wrote to Cuomo

calling on the governor to revise the guidelines.

In their letter, the county leaders wrote, “We are NY Tough and we are also Southern Tier Strong. We appreciate your leadership and flexibility through this unprecedented crisis. Given the Southern Tier’s positive healthcare data we feel that we can accommodate larger graduations with the appropriate standards and precautions. Let’s work together to give the thousands of high school graduates and their families in the Southern Tier the graduations that they deserve.”

In today’s letter to Cuomo, O’Mara, Palemsano, and Friend added, “We encourage you to acknowledge that regional leaders have all along over the past several months done an outstanding job of public outreach and diligent adherence to state guidelines to an extent that the Southern Tier’s COVID-19 healthcare data and metrics are positive and continue to move in the right direction...Allowing our high school seniors to celebrate their accomplishments and bring much-needed closure to their high school careers has, in our view, become increasingly important in 2020 – the beginning of a new and promising decade in their lives which, unfortunately and through no fault of their own, is off to a difficult and troubling start. Beginning this month, we are presented with a chance to help reframe the narrative for these graduating seniors. Amidst all of the ongoing public health, economic, and social pain, uncertainty, and unrest impacting all of us, a traditional in-person graduation ceremony, involving the full school community, offers the opportunity for our young New Yorkers to celebrate community, family, unity, achievement, and hope for the future. We know you value these very ideals and principles and, consequently, we hope you will agree.”

O’Mara, Palmesano, Friend and other Southern Tier leaders urge area residents who support their effort to call the governor’s office at 518-474-8390, or send an online message [HERE](#).