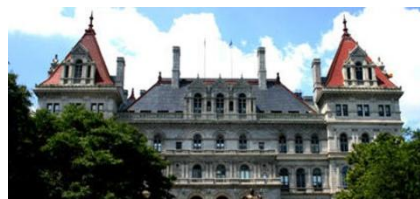


NYS SENATOR TOM O'MARA

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Guest Column

for the week of February 21, 2011

"Let Your Voice Be Heard"

Abraham Lincoln once said, "Public opinion in this country is everything." That may be as good a reflection as any other to start this annual observance of Presidents Week. I'll even take it one step further and say this: for that opinion to be valuable, it must be informed.

People want, in ways large and small, their voices to be heard. We've seen this powerful, fundamental force of democracy arrive on the world stage in recent weeks. And in far less dramatic or historic fashion, but in ways no less important to our own lives, we're seeing the very same idea rise up here at home in New York State as the tough choices being posed by the 2011-2012 state budget become clearer by the day.

So in keeping with the underlying spirit of Presidents Week, we can be proud to note that our nation still sets the standard for participatory democracy around the world. That's an ongoing testament to the genius of America's founders and to the enduring strength of what the nation's first president, George Washington, called the "American experiment." It's also a tribute to the men and women, like Lincoln, who have carried on this ideal of government ever since.

As New York's new governor, Andrew Cuomo, has been fond of saying, "The people get it." I have to agree. On February 1st, Governor Cuomo proposed a \$132.9-billion state budget calling for a 2.7-percent overall reduction in state spending and a comprehensive realignment and restructuring of many state programs and services. As expected, it's sparked a widespread, grassroots reaction from every corner of the state and from every walk of life.

That's as it should be. But it remains a key legislative responsibility to open the door even wider to public interest and, most of all, participation in maybe the most difficult budget cycle we've ever faced in New York. So the Legislature's fiscal committees have begun a series of public hearings at the Capitol to better assess the statewide impact of the Cuomo plan. A recent legislative agreement ensures this year's budget adoption process will include the use of joint, bipartisan budget conference committees – in other words, public budget negotiations. That ensures the public scrutiny that's critical this year and I'll be participating as a member on two of these committees.

Closer to home, I've been discussing the budget directly with county legislators and other local officials, business leaders, educators, health care representatives, not-for-profit organizations, and many, many other concerned citizens from across the region.

Most recently, I've launched a new, detailed online budget survey to encourage ongoing local input on many of the choices before us and to invite informed decisions. My website also provides access to details on the Cuomo plan, including budget briefing books and other documents.

So I'd like to ask you to take some time to review the governor's budget proposals so you can be as informed as possible, then take a few minutes to participate in this survey on Governor Cuomo's proposed response to the current economic and fiscal crisis. Just go to my Senate website, omara.nysenate.gov, and click on the "Let Your Voice Be Heard" icon on the home page. From here you can answer a series of 10 questions as well as submit more specific comments on the budget and other matters.

It's all designed to help us reach the point of final decision. Abraham Lincoln also once said, "Be sure you put your feet in the right place, then stand firm." We're approaching that time in New York when we're going to have to plant our feet on some solid common ground and stand firm on some tough decisions. Your voices should be heard.