

EDITORIAL

Albany haste, and rookie mistakes

In Democrats' rush to pass bills, the State Senate has dropped the ball on the Island's top priority: a permanent tax cap

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Three weeks into what could be a landmark legislative session in Albany, Long Island's six Democratic state senators, who were pivotal to giving their party control of the chamber, helped pass an avalanche of legislation that had been blocked by Republicans.

The bills the Senate and the Assembly have been in a hurry to pass, and for Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to quickly sign, are the ones the Democratic base, political contributors and advocacy groups want in return for their patience and support. But these initiatives don't include ones most crucial to Long Islanders. By helping other constituencies get what they want without first insisting Long Island gets what it needs, these Democratic senators from Long Island committed what could be a very consequential rookie error.

The No. 1 priority on Long Island is making the tax cap permanent. The law limits annual spending increases by school districts and municipalities to 2 percent or the rate of inflation, whichever is lower. The cap can be exceeded if 60 percent of voters in a taxing district approve a higher tax. A longtime Republican initiative, the cap has been the key to controlling property taxes since its passage in 2011. Senate Republicans passed a permanent tax cap bill many times, only to see the teachers unions

kill it in the Assembly.

That's why not fighting for it out of the gate could turn out to be a major tactical error. Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins did have her chamber approve a permanent tax cap bill, but by not demanding the Assembly pass it in return for the Senate approving measures Speaker Carl Heastie badly wanted, she risks it languishing as a one-house bill.

There is never enough money to go around in the state budget. Needed funds must be captured forcefully. And the only way you win those games, particularly when others hold stronger hands, is by trading off the needs of various constituencies. Long Island also needs its fair share of school funding, for all its districts. But there is only so much money to go around and the Democratic power base, centered in New York City in both the Assembly and the Senate, will claw hard. Will the Senate now have to trade off education funding to get a cap?

The voting reforms that were the first order of business in Albany this year are both crucial to the proper operation of government and time sensitive, and it is right that they be enacted without horse-trading. The much-needed changes include early voting, putting state and federal primaries on the same day in June and limiting to \$5,000 the political contribu-



Senate members meet during opening day of the 2019 legislative session in Albany on Jan. 9.

tions of limited liability corporations.

But several of the other bills that have passed, while clearly supported by Long Island's Democratic senators, are far more important to their New York City counterparts. Not pairing action on them with action on Long Island priorities was a lost opportunity by Stewart-Cousins.

The Dream Act, which allows young people brought to this country illegally by their parents to participate in the state's college financial-aid program, is a huge priority for Heastie but a contentious plan on Long Island. These young people deserve financial aid and a shot at college, but the existing and flawed Assembly bill that was hurriedly passed by both houses was not carefully read in the Senate last week. Now the bill will have to be amended, because as written it could allow foreigners

here on even a temporary visa to receive financial aid; the same would be true for people who move here and take a high-school equivalency test just for the financial aid. Paying tuition for people who have no reason to stay in New York and return benefits to the taxpayer is unjustifiable and politically stupid.

The Dream Act or a bill desperately wanted by the teachers unions that would decouple student performance on standardized tests from teacher evaluations should have been paired with a permanent tax cap. That would balance the needs of core Democratic constituencies with Long Island's.

For decades, the complaint has been that Albany only ever passes its budget and other bills at the last possible moment, often secretly and in the wee hours. But this year's haste at the start of the session also begs a

question: Isn't there a lawmaking option somewhere in between frenzied and glacial, when bills can be read and absorbed and get a reasonable amount of dissection and discussion, a few hearings and public input before they're voted on?

Democrats argued that their drive to capture the Senate would not be disastrous for Long Island, as it was when Democrats took over in 2009. The winning six candidates said they'd be able to form a powerful "suburban coalition" to fight for our region's needs. Doing that means fighting for their region against the competing, traditional Democratic interests. And doing it wisely.

Long Island's Democratic senators haven't lost that war, yet. But they may have used up some ammunition, without taking any ground for their constituents.