

## EDITORIAL

# Crunch time for state budget

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

**F**or the second straight year, Albany sausage-making has an extra pinch of uncertainty. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and state lawmakers are crafting a budget, unsure about federal funding in the era of President Donald Trump.

Add in a desire to please constituencies in an election year, the prospect of huge cuts in Medicaid funding and a \$4 billion state deficit and you have a recipe for volatility or a spur for compromise. We're hoping for the latter.

Given that, the budget proposed by the Democratic-dominated Assembly to increase spending by 9.3 percent is completely irresponsible. Cuomo's \$168 billion spending plan, a 2.3 percent increase, is more grounded, as is the Republican-controlled Senate's pitch of a 2 percent hike — depending on how the money is doled out. The budget is due this week.

Here's what we're seeking:

### SCHOOL AID

Tread carefully. With the loss of federal deductions for state and local taxes, voters in May are likely to reject school budgets that bust the tax cap. That doesn't mean the state should ward off the pain with a big hike in aid, as it has in the cap era by doling out increases that easily outstripped inflation. Sooner or later, school districts that haven't made tough decisions on teacher contracts are going to have to do just that. The loss of the SALT deduction means that time has come.

### VOTING/ETHICS REFORMS

No one has the moral high ground here. The sorry spectacle of state lawmakers being found guilty on corruption charges now touches the governor's office with the recent conviction of former top aide Joseph Percoco.

The raft of needed reforms includes public campaign financing, closing the loophole on big campaign contributions from secretive limited liability companies, early voting to increase participation in elections, and automatic voter registration with eligibility verification during interactions with state agencies to increase voting rolls. Senate and Assembly proposals for a database of all economic development contracts and grants are sensible, too.

### CRIMINAL JUSTICE

It's high time the statute of limitations for victims of sexual abuse as children be extended far beyond age 23 for a criminal complaint and age 21 for a civil claim. Ditto for a 1-year look-back for victims of past abuse. The Senate has been the roadblock, along with the Catholic Church, with Cardinal Timothy Dolan saying the look-back would be "toxic for us." Not adopting these reforms would be toxic for the abused.

Recent examples in Suffolk County make clear that wrongful convictions can result when prosecutors do not quickly share information with defense attorneys. New York's antiquated laws on discovery must be toughened, as Cuomo proposes, with protections for witnesses who might face danger if their names are exposed. Reluctant Senate members should note that some D.A.'s in New York already share information without affecting public safety.

### LIPA SETTLEMENT

The dispute between LIPA and local taxing jurisdictions on the overtaxing of four little-used power plants will be settled soon or go to trial in June. Cuomo and Long Island's Senate delegation must ensure that enough cash, around \$100 million, is available to cushion the shock for affected districts via a phase-in period

if negotiations prod a settlement, the best resolution. If Democrats take control of the Senate in the fall elections, Albany may no longer be counted on to help.

### RETIREMENT PLAN

More than half of the state's private-sector workers lack access to an employer-sponsored 401(k) plan. So Cuomo's proposal for a retirement savings program that is voluntary for employers to offer and employees to join and that requires no match from businesses is a no-brainer. A dispute over whether an existing or new agency will run the program can't be an excuse to not get this off the ground.

### FOOD WASTE

Cuomo's improved proposal to reduce the obscene amount of food wasted every year and help feed the hungry requires large generators of excess food, like supermarkets and colleges, to donate edible items to food banks or other hunger-relief organizations and to recycle the rest by composting or anaerobic digestion. With an added \$8 million to help with preparations and reasonable hardship waivers, the Senate must get on board.

### DRUG TAKE-BACK

Another proposal that makes too much sense not to pass. It requires pharmaceutical manufacturers to fund a statewide drug disposal program and chain pharmacies to participate. Drop boxes rather than mail-backs should be the required collection method — boxes are far more effective — but this would be a strong step toward keeping drugs away from potential abusers who raid family medicine chests and out of our waters when they are flushed down the toilet.

### SUFFOLK BUSES

The good news: Lawmakers are discussing two avenues to address the chronic underfunding of Suffolk's bus system. We prefer the Senate's version, which would deliver more money and move the state's funding scheme closer to fairness. It would mandate that Suffolk have parity in state funding with the smallest upstate system, which is Syracuse. That would bring Suffolk an extra \$7 million; it gets \$26 million from

the state while Syracuse receives \$33 million. But extra state aid cannot mean the county reduces its contribution.

### SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Time's up for strengthening New York's laws on sexual harassment. Mandatory arbitration agreements should be banned. Processes for dealing with harassers in and out of government should be more transparent. Sexual harassment cases in state government should be handled by an inspector general, not the ineffective Joint Commission on Public Ethics. As for the Albany consensus that no public funds be used to pay settlements involving state officials, we think that using taxpayer dollars puts the onus of responsibility on the state and makes sure victims receive the money they are awarded.

### PLASTIC BAGS

Cuomo can recover from his failure to come up with a statewide plan as promised last year, and burnish his environmental credentials by pushing a statewide fee. Designate the money for a specific environmental cause; that's worked elsewhere.

### GUNS

A tale of two fixes to our national problem. Cuomo and the Assembly want to stop domestic violence abusers from having guns and extend the waiting period on a gun sale background check from three days to 10. The Assembly also is pushing a ban on bump stocks. The Senate wants to fund retired police officers to serve as armed school resource officers. We like all of it.

### LAND PRESERVATION

A Cuomo plan supported by the Senate offers tax relief for private landowners of forested land and incentives for them to sustainably manage their woods, by improving and streamlining the existing tax abatement program and making more lands eligible. With 75 percent of state forests in private hands and preservation of precious trees essential, the Assembly needs to join in to get this done.

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It's an ambitious list. But it would make New York a better state.