

Little getting done in Albany, but Judgment Day is coming

As of today, the New York State budget is officially 50 days late.

There are roughly five weeks left until the typical end of the legislative session, unless there is no budget agreement and our elected officials stay in Albany into July to finish the state's business.

On Tuesday, the state Democrats will gather to choose their slate of candidates for November's elections, with the Republicans following suit June 1.

This sounds like a good time to look at what actually has been accomplished by our elected officials during this legislative season and how that has affected our economy.

The truth is that using the word "accomplished" just might be an overstatement. It's been a very mixed legislative session, and I'd have to give much of it bad reviews. In fact, the highlight so far is that the Legislature hasn't passed a budget with a whole new bunch of taxes.

Along the way, there have been a few developments that might be considered bright spots.

Thanks to a hard push from Unshackle Upstate, all members of the Senate Republican Conference as well as Sens. Darrel Aubertine, D-Watertown, William Stachowski, D-Buffalo, and David Valesky, D-Syracuse, were convinced to oppose legislation that would have expanded who could make legal challenges under the State Environmental Quality Review Act. This bill would have allowed special interests anywhere in the state to intervene in what is a local government decision, surely driving up costs and taxes and hurting job creation.



ON BUSINESS

Sandra Parker

ing it would have killed the spending bill and could have shut down the government. But lawsuits filed by the labor unions have all that on hold until a court can determine whether the furloughs are legal.

The Service Employees International Union has called the debate over public-sector compensation "a smear campaign" and "a constant refrain in the Republican handbook."

At Unshackle Upstate, we prefer to call it fiscal responsibility, the duty to analyze a significant segment of taxpayer-funded state spending to determine if changes might be in order.

In a recent blog posting, SEIU said that according to a new report—a national analysis by two economists—state and local public-sector employees are paid 11 percent to 12 percent less than their private-sector counterparts.

The problem is that the study misses two key points that basically render it irrelevant to New York. For starters, if you look at just New York data, you get a very different result. Unshackle Upstate's own report, "New York's Double Standard," found that across upstate, salaries for state and local government employees were 10 percent higher than the private-

The Senate also voted to raise the state's cap on charter schools from 200 to 460, a move that should boost New York's chances of winning federal Race to the Top funding and improve urban education.

For a minute there, we thought there was another bright spot. The Senate Agriculture Committee, in a bipartisan effort, defeated the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act, which would have devastated our upstate agricultural community and raised prices for all of our fruits and vegetables. Further, the bill would have forced unionization on-to workers who in many instances don't want it, preferring the freedom to move around and work the growing season. The state Farm Bureau estimated that the bill would cost New York farms \$200 million annually, a huge bite for a significant contributor to our region's economy.

Unions wanted the bill to increase their membership, even if it was at the expense of New York's agricultural community. And labor unions in New York don't take no for an answer. So the bill has since been reintroduced just a few short weeks after defeat, meaning the battle is back on.

As the budget debate has languished, the projected deficit continues to grow, shining a spotlight on state spending. Unionized state workers got an automatic 4 percent raise last month under a contract negotiated before the recession and Wall Street meltdown that have wrecked the state's finances. Gov. David Paterson has been attempting to secure concessions from so-far-uncooperative unions, such as deferring the raise.

Last week, Paterson drafted an emergency spending bill and included a one-day furlough of state workers, which he said would save \$30 million a week. The Legislature reluctantly passed it, because reject-

sector average. In fact, Alaska is the only state that pays its government employees higher wages and salaries than New York. And the salaries and wages of New York's government workers are 44 percent higher than the average of the other 49 states.

But there really is only one point that I need to make: We agree that public employees deserve the fairest compensation we can afford. But right now, New York can't afford this.

When unions and others rail about the high salaries paid to executives of private companies, they miss the point. Those salaries are paid out of the proceeds of the company, not by taxpayers! If a company doesn't make money, it can't pay its workers.

Public employee unions in Ohio, Florida, Massachusetts, Nevada, Oregon and Connecticut have accepted pay and benefit reductions to help their governments weather the results of the worst economic downturn in 80 years.

I'm trying to be optimistic that when the budget is finally passed, it won't include a whole new wave of spending, paid for by one-shots and higher taxes. History tells me otherwise.

But voters, be mindful. Nov. 2 is Judgment Day, when we go to the polls to fill all state-wide offices and all 212 legislative seats. It's our big chance to make a change.

So I urge you to study up on your senator and Assembly member and see what they have supported. Use the Unshackle Upstate Scorecard. And if they are not voting in your best interests, not trying to bring down your taxes and make New York's economy viable, we should tell them it's time to find other employment.

Sandra Parker is president and CEO of the Rochester Business Alliance Inc. Contact her at SandyP@RBAlliance.com.