

Albany is listening, but it might still lack the courage to act

Last month I wrote about the Rochester Community Coalition's 2010 agenda and our plans to travel to Albany to seek support for the initiatives it contains. So this month I thought I'd report on that trip, which frankly was unlike any other visit to the Capitol.

On our calendar were meetings with legislative leaders and representatives of the governor's office, as well as some individual legislators.

The Community Coalition agenda was very well received. Both legislative leaders and representatives of the governor's office said they appreciated the organized, focused approach. They also appreciated that this year's agenda was not simply a request for a handout from all-too-scarce state funds and that it included requests for changes in state policies that hamper economic growth.

Having said that, I must tell you I found the mood at the Capitol to be different, in a somewhat positive way. But I also found the culture and the process to be disturbingly familiar.

On the positive side, everyone we talked with seemed to be actually listening, not just being polite. The cause of this new attention: what seemed to be a new re-



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spect for Unshackle Upstate, perhaps even a bit of what might be described as fear about the impact of our bipartisan Judgment Day campaign to affect voter sentiment in the November elections. Much of legislators' anxiety is focused on the Judgment Day scorecard, a nonpartisan rating of all 212 legislators that will reflect their voting records on legislation that affects New York's economy.

In my book, a little fear doesn't hurt. It serves to remind our elected officials that they work for us, the taxpayers, and that they need to listen to all of us, not just selected groups. As voters, we get to choose whom we send to Albany to represent us. The point of Judgment Day is that those legislators who don't understand the problems caused by New York's high

taxes and stifling business regulations, and who aren't willing to support and work for change, shouldn't receive our votes.

There was another positive aspect as well. For the first time, I heard realistic dialogue about the state's financial problems.

In the past, folks at the Capitol paid lip service to the ever-growing budget gap, typically downplaying it and the consequences of state government's tax-and-spend philosophy. This time the message

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seems to have hit home. All the officials we talked with acknowledged that closing the 2010 budget gap will be difficult and painful.

Unfortunately, the talk stopped there, and that's what I find disturbingly familiar.

Sure, there is a lot of talk about cuts to rein in spending and about the usual new

taxes and one-shot revenue enhancers to get through this budget cycle. But no one we spoke with seemed to have the interest, or the willingness, or a sense of obligation to fight for systemic change that would result in long-term savings for the state.

On the list of what they should be talking about: re-examining public employee contracts, furloughing state workers (something the private sector has been doing for two years to trim costs), overhauling the Medicaid system and holding overall state spending absolutely flat.

The conversation has to change, radically and immediately. The taxpayers of New York simply can't take anymore, can't shoulder any more of the state's financial burdens. We deserve better.

That is what Judgment Day is all about. Unshackle Upstate will be waiting and watching our legislators, scrutinizing what they do as well as what they say.

As we all know, actions speak louder than words. That is true for both the actions of our elected officials and the actions of those of us who sent them to Albany.

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