

Upstate advocacy found footing, made progress



Written by

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Unshackle Upstate, which five years ago was a nascent business advocacy group looking for listeners in Albany, this year may have found its voice.

On most issues, of course, its voice echoed almost exactly that of Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who is being widely credited with moving the Legislature on issues ranging from same-sex marriage to a property tax cap. Without Cuomo, the power of Unshackle's voice might have been much less.

Yet for the first time, Unshackle Upstate and all upstate business voices can enter the next legislative year with confidence that they have both the governor's ear and those of lawmakers.

A property tax cap, long one of Unshackle's primary objectives, became law.

A new tax abatement program, replacing the partisan and unpopular Empire Zone program, was upgraded to encourage business [investment](#).

More local control was given to individual State University of New York campuses, which Unshackle believes will help upstate growth.

And, surprisingly, according to Unshackle's Rochester-based executive director Brian Sampson, lawmakers approved the long-delayed Article X power-plant siting law, opening the door for new construction and, presumably, lower energy prices.

"That was one we didn't expect," Sampson said. "Our energy costs are far above the national average. This will expedite the process in bringing new plants on line."

Sampson said the political dynamic in Albany was much different this year, in part because upstate business interests resonated with legislators.

"For the first time, we played offense as much as we did defense," Sampson said about dealing with lawmakers, especially the downstate-dominated Assembly. "Having someone finally in the governor's

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mansion who has vision and doesn't waffle made a huge difference in getting these things done."

"We do see traction in Albany, and I give kudos to Unshackle for that," said Sandy Parker, president and CEO of the Rochester Business Alliance. In a letter sent last week to RBA members, Parker outlined the list of accomplishments, including the passage of an on-time state budget that cut spending by 2 percent without raising taxes or incurring new debt.

"There are still things to do," Parker said. "But progress was made."

Sampson said that Unshackle's ability to bring in new members to the business coalition, especially in the Hudson Valley, indicates a broader reach for upstate interests and a lessening of downstate influence.

Unshackle Upstate now has 80 members, mostly chambers of commerce and trade groups, representing 70,000 employers and 1.5 million workers.

"We're coming into our own, and some of the Hudson Valley organizations that may have identified with New York City interests are joining us," Sampson said.

Heidi Zimmer-Meyer, president of the Rochester Downtown Development Corp., said she doesn't always agree with Unshackle, "and there's a lot more to do on urban issues. But Unshackle has a louder voice now and we support it and the

agenda as a way to help upstate."

The economic development glass is still only half full, Sampson conceded.

The Legislature left town without passing substantial mandate relief, which he said is essential if the property tax cap is to work as intended. Under the cap, communities can exceed the 2 percent limit if 60 percent of voters assent. That assent is more likely if mandated costs aren't reduced or eliminated.

"Property taxes was Issue 1 and mandate relief was Issue 1A coming into the session," Sampson said. "One without the other won't be nearly as effective."

Sampson also noted that the regional economic councils proposed by Cuomo have yet to be formed. "They're working on them now," he said.

And the moratorium on hydraulic fracturing in the drilling for natural gas should be lifted, Sampson said.

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The state Department of Environmental Conservation issued a report last week supporting restricted hydrofracking. But the moratorium is still in place.

"This means jobs and growth. It's big," Sampson said of the drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale, which lies beneath much of the Southern Tier.

Sampson said the recently completed legislative session said something positive about the state.

"Smart government can be put in place," he said. "It can be done."

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