

Time to cap spending in Albany

THE ISSUE | Addressing the state's budget deficit.

OUR OPINION | Legislators must embrace the notion of a cap to restrain spending and possibly build a budget surplus.

The ax is about to fall in Albany as state legislators meet in special session beginning today to address the state's projected budget deficit for this year, next year and possibly beyond.

Unfortunately, the ax will have to cut deep and often to make up for the billions in revenue shortfalls that have continued to escalate throughout the year.

And don't overlook the fact the state wouldn't be in this situation had lawmakers curbed their spending last year, and the year before, when it was obvious the books could not possibly balance out.

Now, the state is in a real pickle and can't even pay its bills for December. Mid-year cuts to many programs – such as education, health care, mental health and transportation – seem to be the only way the state can weather this storm.

It makes us wonder just how much of this could have been avoided had lawmakers and Gov. David Paterson constrained their spending last spring instead of going on a feed-

ing frenzy when the state received \$25 billion in federal stimulus money.

Or, if a cap that would have limited spending to 120 percent of the consumer price index or 4 percent, whichever was less, had been put in place. Many Republicans, like state Sen. George Winner and Assemblymen Tom O'Mara and Jim Bacalles, advocated a spending cap but met resistance from Democrats, including Paterson.

Now with the state facing a budget hole estimated as high as \$4 billion, Paterson admits an instituted control on spending might be the best way to prevent deficits in the future. Further, a cap may also create budget surpluses that could then be used as taxpayers' rebates.

If the rest of the legislature realizes the benefits of a spending cap, then the state could right itself within a few years. If not, then the state faces an extended budget crisis and more cuts to the services residents rely on.

COMMENTARY | GRACE-MARIE TURNER

AARP cheats seniors

Clearly something must be up with AARP.

Why else would the nation's largest lobbying organization, sworn to protect the interests of senior citizens, watch silently as Congress plans to cut Medicare spending by \$400 billion to pay for its health reform legislation? Could it be that the interests of seniors and AARP are not exactly aligned?

Let's follow the money. AARP takes in more than half of its \$1.1 billion budget in royalty fees from health insurers and other vendors that market services with the organization's name. Medicare supplementary policies, called "Medigap" plans, make up the biggest share of this royalty revenue.

AARP has an interest in selling more, not fewer, Medigap plans, of course. But there is a competitor on the block.

A growing number of seniors are enrolling in a new form of Medicare coverage – Medicare Advantage – where they don't need Medigap.

Medicare Advantage was created in 2003 to give seniors the option of joining private plans that are paid up to 12 percent more to provide better health benefits than traditional Medicare.

These private plans compete with each other by offering seniors such services as lower premiums, better drug coverage, dental care and eyeglasses, and more comprehensive coverage for major medical expenses.

Nearly 11 million of Medicare's 45-million beneficiaries are in the program.

Congress' health reform bills would cut spending for Medicare Advantage by at least \$150 billion. President Obama has singled out Medicare Advantage, saying it is a give-away to private insurance companies. But virtually all of the extra money goes back to seniors in the form of better benefits, so it's seniors who have the most to lose.

A *Washington Post* front-page story on Oct. 27 questioned whether AARP has a

conflict of interest in appearing to represent seniors while watching Congress cut Medicare.

Medigap plans are a cash cow for AARP. And if people don't need them because they can enroll in Medicare Advantage plans, that's a revenue loss for AARP.

While the organization has some partnering arrangements with Medicare Advantage plans, they provide a fraction of the revenues to the organization that Medigap does.

Second, if Medicare's benefits are cut by \$400 billion or more, seniors will have an ever greater need for Medigap coverage.

Tens of thousands of seniors have resigned from AARP, many of them cutting up their membership cards to protest the organization's promotion of health reform.

The new chief executive officer of AARP, Barry Rand, who was a strong supporter of President Obama during last year's presidential campaign, says AARP is not protesting the Medicare cuts because reducing waste and fraud in Medicare will make the program stronger over the long term.

Medicare is in dire need of modernization to make it more efficient, but savings should go back into making it more solvent. But instead of contributing any savings to the \$38 trillion in long-term debt the program is facing, the bills before Congress would use Medicare funds to expand health insurance coverage to working Americans.

While expanding coverage also is a worthy goal, if AARP were representing its members well, it would argue that the money should come from other sources.

It's no wonder seniors are upset.

■ Grace-Marie Turner is president and founder of the Galen Institute, which is funded in part by the pharmaceutical and medical industries. Readers may write to her at Galen Institute, 128 South Royal Street, Alexandria, Va.

ARTIST'S VIEW



POLITICS | U.S. REP. ERIC MASSA

Why I voted 'no' on reform bill

Since the first day of my public political life I have been focused on expanding this nation's health care system. At every town hall meeting, public speech and in some 300 living room gatherings, I have identified what I consider to be two of the most critical weaknesses of our current system: a private for-profit insurance industry that is not regulated and a mandate that requires health care to be a burden on our employers. We are the only industrialized nation in the world with such a system and it has failed us badly for all the reasons that I have documented here and elsewhere.

Now I am being asked, perhaps by the majority of my constituents, to vote for a health care bill that will enshrine into

law the two parts of our health care system that are most problematic. This bill, after all is said and done, will require – for the first time in law – employers to either pay for employee health care or commit a crime if a fee is not paid; and for the first time ever, virtually all Americans will be required to buy private health insurance, pay a fine, or be found in violation and subject to prosecution.

This is not what I campaigned for, it is not what I am committed to, and after all is said and done, I do not believe that this will help the people of my district nor fellow citizens. This bill has tremendous popularity, and based on the mail and phone calls I have received, I think it's probable that a slight majority believe they want this

based on the possibility and promise of eventual expanded health insurance coverage.

In fact, I had one phone call from a constituent who yelled at me saying that I was now personally responsible for the 45,000 deaths that will occur next year because these Americans were uninsured.

"How can you allow ideology to drive your decision?" I was asked.

This is the conflict. Ideology is not driving my decision. I believe this bill, for a laundry list of details that all stem from employer-based, unregulated, private, for-profit health insurance, will make our health care system worse.

An impact on Medicare, objections to constitutionality, impacts on rural health care, a lack of true cost control, a tremen-

dous expansion of federal overhead, a lack of a true public option, a lack of expansion of doctors – are all debatable points.

That said, my opposition does not come from Washington, D.C., political talking points, but rather from a decade of study and immersion in this subject.

The constituents of this congressional district did not hire me to pander to them or tell them what I think they want to hear. They hired me to fully understand – in detail – the legislation I am asked to consider and only support that which I think will help. That is what I have done. That is why I voted 'no' on H.R. 3962.

■ U.S. Rep. Eric Massa, D-Corning, represents New York's 29th Congressional District.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Free Comfort from prison

TO THE EDITOR | On Oct. 13, *The Leader*, printed a letter from Thomas H. Munger, president of the New York State Troopers Police Benevolent Association. Munger's mean-spirited and misleading letter advocated the continued imprisonment of Larry Comfort, convicted in 1982 of second degree homicide and cocaine trafficking.

On appeal, New York overturned and sealed Larry Comfort's homicide conviction, but mainly because of vindictive State Police lobbying, mainly with various parole board members, Larry has already served several years beyond his maximum sentence.

Meanwhile, the shooter in the case, Larry's brother Joe, did not shoot Officer Van Hall and his partner in the back, as Munger stated. The two wounds came frontally, and strong suspicions persist to this day that Joe was actually returning the troopers' fire. Moreover, Joe's gun – he had been deer hunting that morning – was a standard shotgun, not the criminally dramatic sawed-off kind Munger's letter described.

If anyone in Steuben County cares, both

Comforts have been model prisoners. Larry has successfully passed every sort of educational and spiritual program the prison system offers. He is level-headed, articulate and friendly. He is a threat to no one, and he has, for over a decade now, fully deserved his freedom.

John Swinton
State College, Pa.

Neighborhood schools work

TO THE EDITOR | I wish I could agree with Ginny Wright on Alternative C. Over the years, she and her husband, Jerry, have done many good things.

In her Nov. 6 letter to the editor, Ginny suggests that I read the Vote Yes Web site on Alternative C – which I have done.

However, I agree with the views in the Web site of the Committee to Save CPP Small Neighborhood Schools. If you compare the two Web sites, you will see why I can't agree with Ginny on spending \$241 million to dismantle and then rebuild the school system.

Our small neighborhood schools work exceptionally well; and CFA, NSB, East, and West are all tried and true parts of this community. I hope

they will be with us for a long time – just like Jerry and Ginny. The Small Neighborhood Schools Web site is at sites.google.com/site/savecppsmallschools/

Thomas C. O'Brien
Corning

Massa lets voters down

TO THE EDITOR | Last November I was so excited that Eric Massa was elected as my congressman. I, like so many in this district, voted for change. I voted to get health care reform and clean energy legislation, as well as to improve the economy and make Western New York a better place to live.

I am greatly disappointed in how Rep. Massa has voted. He voted against the energy bill, something that was widely supported and would have brought jobs. Similarly, he voted against the health care bill, a bill needed to ensure that Western New Yorkers would have access to affordable health care.

These bills are important to our quality of life, and Rep. Massa knew it. In fact he is quoted in the *Washington Times* as saying "I will vote adamantly against the interests of my district if I actually think what I am doing is going to be helpful." He

did vote against our interests and the position he advocated this summer. I voted for change, but Rep. Massa is not voting for change. He is voting for the status quo, and we deserve better.

Erin M. Pollard
Alfred

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