



Assemblyman

Robin Schimminger

Reports to You

State budget boosts education, cuts taxes, grows economy

You may have read about the state budget in a newspaper or heard about it in the media, and while it may seem far removed from your busy everyday life, the work my colleagues and I do in Albany is anything but distant. It directly affects the lives of each of my constituents.

The now enacted 2016-17 state budget represents the culmination of many months of work both here in the district and in the state capitol.

The \$146.7 billion spending plan invests in education, cuts taxes and aims to grow the economy. While we don't have the space here to discuss everything in the budget, I would like to highlight a few key items.

One of those is education. Children are our future, and they deserve the highest quality education. The budget reflects that belief, with an increase in education aid of \$1.47 billion for a total of \$24.8 billion. This represents the largest investment in education in state history, an investment that will help prevent teacher layoffs, program cuts and keep the pressure off local property taxpayers.

Here is how the percentages for state aid increases break down locally for schools within the 140th Assembly district: Tonawanda City School District will see an increase of 4.9 percent; Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda School District, 5.35 percent; Sweet Home Central School District, 11 percent; Buffalo Public Schools, 4.64 percent; and North Tonawanda City School District, 4.9 percent.

The budget increases Foundation Aid by \$627 million. Perhaps most notably, the budget ends a negative calculation used for several years to balance the state budget at the expense of our schools: the Gap Elimination Adjustment. The budget provides \$433 million to fully eliminate the GEA, putting an end to the hardship it caused schools and the burden it put on taxpayers.

College should be affordable for all, yet many young people are often burdened by debt, a reality that limits their opportunities and ability to reach milestones previous generations more easily met. That is why both houses of the Legislature rejected a tuition hike at State University of New York schools. SUNY students and their families will not see an increase in tuition for the coming academic year. In addition, the budget also provides more than \$1 billion for the Tuition Assistance Program. TAP is a grant program that helps

eligible state residents pay tuition at both public and independent colleges and universities throughout the state. The budget also boosts funding for the state's community colleges, which will receive a \$13 million hike in base aid for a total of \$503 million in operating aid.

Libraries help to educate our community, and this budget supports them. State library aid is set at \$95.6 million, a \$4 million increase from the previous year, representing a 4.3 percent increase in total library aid.

All of us know that money is tight, and every dollar matters. I am pleased the budget includes a modest tax cut for families. These cuts would incrementally reduce state tax rates for single filers earning between \$13,000 and \$200,000; heads of households earning between \$19,500 and \$250,000; and married couples earning between \$26,000 and \$300,000. Tax rates for brackets in these ranges would decrease from the current 5.9, 6.45 and 6.65 percent to 5.5, 5.5 and 6.0 percent, respectively, during an eight-year period. This could affect as many as six million New Yorkers.

I have always been an advocate for veterans. This budget provides \$1.62 million in restorations and additional funding for aimed at supporting returning service members as they transition back into civilian life. Additionally, the budget includes \$166 million in funding to address the public health crisis caused by heroin and opioid abuse in communities throughout the state.

As chairman of the Assembly Committee on Economic Development, Job Creation, Commerce and Industry, my focus has long been on the growth of business and jobs in WNY and across the state. I secured targeted funding

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WELCOMING HOSPITAL EXECUTIVES • Assemblyman Schimminger, third from the left, is pictured with a number of legislators in the state Assembly Chamber in the Capitol in Albany. Schimminger is flanked by Assemblywomen Jane Corwin, far left, and Crystal Peoples-Stokes. To his right are Michael Osborne, vice president of finance for the Catholic Health System; Peter Bergmann, president and CEO of Sisters of Charity Hospital; James Millard, president and CEO of Kenmore Mercy Hospital; and Assemblyman Ray Walter.

Community wins in wake of Huntley's closure

\$30 million state fund will help localities cope with lost revenue

For decades, along the shores of the Niagara River has sat one of the Town of Tonawanda's industrial giants, the Huntley Generating Station. Yet in March of this year, the River Road facility ceased operations, becoming part of Tonawanda's past.

Tonawanda now joins a handful of communities throughout the state with shuttered coal-powered electricity generating stations. At one time, there were seven operating plants in the state. Now there are three. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has called for the elimination of all coal-burning power plants by 2020.

Its closure isn't a surprise. The Huntley station first began producing electrical power in 1916. At one time, Huntley consisted of six units, installed between 1942 and 1958. Two units were retired in 2005 and another two in 2007. The only two remaining units ceased operating on March 1, marking Huntley's final end.

What does Huntley's closure mean? The loss of more than 70 jobs. The potential loss of millions of dollars in property tax revenues — roughly \$3 million annually for the Ken-Ton School District, \$2 million for the town and \$1 million for the county. It means residents may have had to pay more in local taxes to compensate or lose vital services.

I didn't want that to happen. I am very happy to report that the help I sought materialized in the form of a \$30 million fund contained in the final 2016-17 state budget, which will financially assist localities, such as the Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda School District, Town of Tonawanda and County of Erie, in which an electric-generating facility has ceased operations.

The funding will be available to those localities facing a significant reduction in property tax revenues with the loss of an electric-generating plant. This includes all local government, ranging from school districts to special districts.

Although a \$19 million mitigation fund was enacted at the end of last year's legislative session to help localities, the process for disbursing the funds was cumbersome, and the eligibility criteria were not clear. Also, localities needed assurances that there would be enough funding available to help them deal with the anticipated reduction in local revenues going forward. That's why we've also changed the funding mechanism to make it easier for localities to access these funds.

More specifically, the funding will be available to localities experiencing a reduction in property tax or PILOT payment revenues paid by a power plant of at least 20 percent, and the state assistance will be paid annually on a first-come, first-served basis.

This funding didn't come easy. It was the result of many months of meetings both in my local office and in Albany and repeated requests to the governor and other officials, telling them, "The time to act on the coal plant mitigation fund is now." I prodded Howard Zensky, chairman and CEO of Empire State Development, which is the agency that will be administering the funds, asking him for clarity on what exactly the governor's plan was for aiding municipalities. I met often with local officials to determine our localities' specific needs. At the end of the day, it took legislative action in the 2016-17 state budget to get the results we wanted.



AIRING LOCAL ISSUES IN ALBANY • Assemblyman Schimminger, who represents the Tonawandas, Kenmore and portions of Buffalo, interviews Joseph Emminger, the newly elected supervisor of the Town of Tonawanda, during a recent taping in Albany for Schimminger's cable television show. They discussed the impact the closure of the Huntley Generating Station on River Road would have on the community. Schimminger's show airs at 8 p.m. Mondays on Channel 22 for Verizon FiOS customers; at 2:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays; and 10 p.m. Wednesdays, also on Channel 22, for Time Warner Cable viewers.

Many residents and elected and community leaders came to me with concerns about how Huntley's closure would negatively affect them, and I am very pleased that the state will come to their aid with the funding promised. I am glad to have been in a position where I could offer my assistance on their behalf. I see the \$30 million in funding as a big win for this community, but the assistance doesn't stop there. Moving forward, I will continue to help our community deal with the ongoing impact of the Huntley closure.

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for several local organizations that facilitate economic growth. This includes \$100,000 for Canisius College's Center for Professional Development and Women's Business Center; \$50,000 for the Town of Tonawanda Water Resources Department to conduct an engineering study on the feasibility of providing water services to area industries; and \$50,000 for the World Trade Center Buffalo Niagara to further enhance export trade in our region.

Maintaining and repairing public transportation and infrastructure is also a critical function of government, and I am pleased the budget includes significant funding for upgrades to local water and sewer and transportation infrastructure statewide. We restored parity between downstate mass transit funding and funding for upstate highways and bridges, and a four-year increase of \$400 million in CHIPs funding will aid municipalities in maintaining and improving local roads.

Legislation to exempt senior citizens from jury duty introduced

Today, New York's population is more than 19 million, with more than four million individuals aged 60 or older. As the state's population ages, that demographic is only going to keep growing.

While many of our state's seniors are active and vital members of the community, the New York State Office of the Aging estimates that approximately 17 percent of the senior population suffers from some form of functional impairment.

In addition to medical issues, seniors face other issues, such as transportation challenges. Some seniors are no longer able to drive or don't have ready access to public transportation. Because of this, a number of my colleagues have joined me in working to lift the burden that jury duty places on so many of our seniors.

I recently reintroduced legislation that would allow senior citizens aged 70 and older to exempt themselves from serving jury duty. This is a much-needed change in the law that would help many of the seniors both in my district and across the state. Incidentally, all state and local judges in New York must retire upon reaching 70 years of age.

Last year, a woman contacted my office, who, at the time, was 86 years old. She had received a jury service notice. She had to take a taxi to the court building in downtown Buffalo, costing her \$50, and a taxi home, costing her another \$50. She was not picked to serve on a jury, but it was physically difficult for her getting to the location, and it was also costly. Although she had a negative experience, it is a catalyst for change, as her story represents countless others that have gone untold. The frustration this woman felt is shared by many other seniors across the state.

This is how it works: If summoned, an individual who has reached the age of 70 years would be able to decide if he or she wants to serve. If that person chose not to serve, he or she would simply mark a box on the jury form, return it to the commissioner of jurors, and jury service would be waived. This would be a simple process, one that would alleviate the burden of many of my constituents.

At present, 26 other states give seniors the option to serve or not serve on a jury depending on their personal circumstances. It is time New York did the same.



HELPING THE SABRES FOUNDATION

Assemblyman Schimminger presents Larry Playfair, president of the Buffalo Sabres Alumni Foundation, with a framed, ceremonial pen set during a recent meeting at First Niagara Center. Schimminger had sponsored a state law that permitted nonprofit organizations, such as the Sabres Foundation, to increase the amount of a prize awarded by raffle. The Sabres Foundation has supported many Western New York organizations, including Women & Children's Hospital of Buffalo, Make-A-Wish Foundation, Big Brothers Big Sisters, SABA and the Ronald McDonald House.

Loan Forgiveness Program helps local students with college debt

Many young people today face an enormous burden from student loan debt. Currently, the average student who attends a four-year institution in New York State graduates with nearly \$30,000 in debt. The increasing debt burden delays milestones previous generations made, such as purchasing a home and starting a family.

The debt crisis is well-documented. College students who graduated in 2015 were the most indebted of any generation in United States history, and that trend isn't expected to end. Student borrowing for higher education continues to rise. Despite those facts, for many young people, the benefits of pursuing a degree far outweigh the costs.

While earning a four-year college degree is a wise decision in the long term, student loan payments are often daunting, especially for recent graduates who are still searching for a good job and building a financial foundation.

Our New York State Get On Your Feet Loan Forgiveness Program, which is now accepting applications, can help ease that early financial stress.

Here's how it works: Students who graduate both high school and college in New York State and receive an undergraduate degree in or after the 2014-15 academic year and have lived in the state for 12 continuous months may be eligible to have as much as two years of federal loan payments forgiven. To be eligible, applicants have to be enrolled in either an income-based or pay-as-you-earn repayment program and have an adjusted gross income of less than \$50,000.

The Get On Your Feet Loan Forgiveness Program goes hand in hand with other efforts to reduce the burden of student debt. The state's Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Incentive Program offers full tuition scholarships to students who study in certain fields at SUNY schools and work in the state after graduation. But while the STEM program targets new SUNY college students, the Get On Your Feet program provides assistance to recent graduates of both SUNY and independent colleges, regardless of major.

Like the STEM Incentive Program, the Get On Your Feet initiative requires its beneficiaries to stay in New York State and contribute their newly learned skills to the workforce as soon as they find jobs.

Applications for the Get On Your Feet program are now being accepted; to learn more, visit www.hesc.ny.gov, or call 1-888-697-4372.



LOBBYING FOR AREA YOUTH

Representatives from the Town of Tonawanda Youth Bureau, along with students from the Ken-Ton community, meet with Assemblyman Schimminger to lobby for funding in Albany. Standing are Sheila Csicseri, left, recreation coordinator with the Town of Tonawanda Youth, Parks and Recreation Department; Cameron Becigneul, a sophomore at Kenmore East High School; Schimminger; and Nicole Caputi, a junior at Cardinal O'Hara High School. Seated is Nicole Fields, also a recreation coordinator with the Recreation Department and the Youth Bureau administrator.



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HEARING FROM VETERANS

Assemblyman Schimminger speaks with Western New York veterans who came to meet with him recently in Albany. Pictured are representatives from the Erie County American Legion participating in the organization's annual lobby day, including Suzanne Quirk, vice commander of the American Legion of Erie County; Karyn Porempski, former president of the American Legion's Auxiliary; Joseph Porempski, past vice commander of the American Legion; and Tom Deinzer, a district aide for the American Legion. The assemblyman has always been a strong advocate for veterans.