



April 25, 2024

Dear Neighbors,

Last week was a long week in Albany as the Assembly extended its normal legislative week into the weekend to finish voting on the NYS Budget. The Legislature passed the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 budget bills totaling \$237 billion, which represents an inflation-adjusted spending decrease of 0.4%. While there are some hard-fought wins to celebrate in this budget, especially around education and aid to municipalities, there are areas where I felt we could have and should have done more.

Most notably, there was great potential in this budget to continue historic actions to transition our electric grid, power generation, transportation, and building infrastructure to a reliability on renewable energy and energy efficiency models. Our current law, which aligns with the United Nations warnings that we must achieve 50% reduction in global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2030, states that we must achieve at least a 40% reduction in GHG emissions by 2030 and net zero by 2050. A lack of action in this year's budget jeopardizes our ability to reach the parameters of existing state law. As we celebrate Earth Day this week, we must take greater strides as a state toward climate solutions and make more significant investments in our transition off of fossil fuels in the final weeks of the legislative session. I remain resolute and hopeful that we can pass additional environmental legislation outside of the budget process this session. New York City and State collectively are in the top 5 of the greatest global contributors to climate change per capita, and we must do our part to limit the worst of climate change impacts.

You can watch [a video of my comments](#) from the Assembly floor on the budget and review budget highlights below. I recognize that our district cares deeply on a number of issues and is interested in budget updates from many areas. To strike a balance between being thorough and being overwhelming, **I plan to share information on additional areas of the enacted budget over the next few newsletters.**

For anyone interested in seeing what the budget looks like in its entirety, [here is a link](#) to the 10 total budget bills. They are broken into two groups: Appropriation Bills and Article VII bills. The appropriations bills, for the most part, outline all the money allocations while the Article VII bills outline all policy language included in the budget. In total, the budget is about 4,100 pages. Every year, we have one Article VII budget bill that we call the “Big Ugly.” This bill includes all the typical subject relevant policies as well as all the policies debated throughout the budget process that were controversial, took the bulk of the negotiating time, and that were the items that determined when the budget was finalized. They are often all finalized at once like a set of dominoes, and as such, are lumped into one of the final open bills. This year that bill ended up being the Education, Labor, and Family Assistance (ELFA) bill.



State Budget

K-12 Education

Educating our youth is one of the most important tasks of our state, and I am proud of the hard-fought wins for education in the final budget, ensuring that foundation aid was protected and critical services were funded.

- \$35.9 billion in funding to the General Support for Public Schools (GSPS), which will include \$24.9 billion in Foundation Aid providing an across the board 2.8% overall increase in the foundation aid rate, a \$934.5 million increase over the 2023-24 School Year (SY)
- The Assembly and Senate rejected the Governor's initial proposal and reinstated the "Hold Harmless" provision of the foundation aid formula in the final budget, which keeps K-12 school districts from receiving a cut in Foundation Aid due to any abrupt changes in enrollment
- Funding for a Foundation Aid study conducted by SUNY Rockefeller Institute of Government with state agencies and stakeholders to review the funding formula and make recommendations on a fair, long-term formula moving forward, including updating the formula from being built on the 2000-year census data to the 2020 census data
- By the end of this year, the Commissioner of Education will provide scientifically proven evidenced-based best practices for reading instruction prioritizing phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and comprehension, including background knowledge, oral language and writing, oral skill development, and will align with the department's culturally responsive-sustaining framework. Each year school districts will be required to update their instruction for Pre-K to 3rd grade to match best practices.
- The Commissioner of Education will require all school districts to verify for all graduating seniors that they either filled out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or, if applicable, the Jose Peralta New York State DREAM Act application. Students do not need to say which one. If preferred, they can sign a waiver saying they didn't or do not want to fill out these financial aid forms. If a student is over 18, they fill it out for themselves. The school has to report annually to the commissioner how many total seniors were enrolled that year and how many completed which of these options. School districts are not allowed to negatively impact a student's graduation if they don't fill out this form.

- A county, city, town, or village within a school district is authorized to establish a demonstration program setting fines on a vehicle operator for failure to stop when a school bus is fully stopped and has the stop sign and/stop lights flashing. A photo violation monitoring systems can be used as sufficient evidence of a violation.

Higher Education

Higher education can transform lives, enable socioeconomic mobility, and generate economic benefits for the state. This year's state budget provides SUNY and CUNY campuses with critical operating funds for this coming academic year.

One of the biggest wins in this year's budget is a solid and long overdue increase in funds to the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). TAP has been a personal passion and platform since I joined the Assembly, and this year I joined the Higher Education Chair Pat Fahy and other brilliant colleagues to collectively push this funding into the final budget to make college more affordable for families and adult students.

- Raises the minimum TAP award from \$500 to \$1,000
- An additional \$55.7 million in funding was included in the final budget to increase the TAP income eligibility thresholds
 - From \$80,000 to \$125,000 for dependent students
 - From \$40,000 to \$60,000 for independent married students
 - From \$10,000 to \$30,000 for independent students
- \$1.3 billion in total to SUNY, including \$277 million in operating funds and \$60 million in additional capital over last year.
- Although SUNY Community Colleges were held harmless in tuition assistance from the state from last year, they have struggled for many years with insufficient funding from the state. The ask was for \$97 million to attain and retain a strong academic workforce. Unfortunately, this final budget only included \$8 million in total additional operating

funds. This will be a boon to keep our critically important community colleges moving forward and give me the platform I need to renew the fight for community colleges in the coming years.

- \$858 million to CUNY, including \$169 million in operating funds and \$40 million in additional capital over last year. \$5.3 million for CUNY Community Colleges
- An additional \$3 million over 2023-24 for financial opportunity programs like the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP), for a total of \$206 million

Environment

To meet our statewide goals of the CLCPA, we will need to make year over year investments to reduce carbon emissions and to reach our electrification targets. This budget falls short in taking the bold action needed, but I am proud of our investments in clean water projects and the Environmental Protection Fund.

- \$500 million (\$250 million over the Executive proposal) for clean water infrastructure
- \$400 million for the Environmental Protection Fund, which includes funding for farmland protection, addressing invasive species, parks, municipal recycling, waterfront revitalization and other initiatives

Local Governments and In-District Funding

After years of advocacy at both the county and state levels as well as advocacy on a recently introduced piece of legislation calling for increased funding to localities from the state called Aid and Incentives to Municipalities (AIM) funding with my colleague Senator Rachel May, I was proud that we finished these budget negotiations with a \$50 million increase to support local governments and bolster economic development. This is the first increase in AIM funding since 2012. Other specific in-district funding that we are bringing home to our district included:

- \$150,000 in support of the **Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC)** services
- \$103,000 in support of the **State Theatre of Ithaca**
- \$300,000 in support of **Tompkins County Rapid Medical Response**



Legislative Update

Legislation to Support Varna Fire Department

Amid budget negotiations, I am happy to share that the bill I championed at the request of the Varna Fire Department passed the Assembly as a home rule bill ([A9345](#)). Like most small fire departments, the Varna Volunteer Fire Company has had difficulty recruiting new volunteers within their 16.7 square mile fire protection district. Their solution was to reach out to Cornell University and Ithaca College to recruit new members, and their efforts have had unprecedented success, growing their company from 7 to over 60 dedicated volunteer EMTs and firefighters. Inclusion of college students to the department provides experience for the students and critical service to our community. This legislation allows the Varna Department to continue their recruitment efforts and ensure compliance with state law that places a limit on non-resident membership for volunteer fire departments.

I had the pleasure of attending the Varna Fire Department Annual Banquet in November, and I appreciate their continued service to the town of Dryden in our district. A huge thank you to Chief Mason Jager and Deputy Chief Nikola Danev in particular (both pictured below) for their dedication to Varna and the wider community.



Around the District

Reclaim Earth Day Rally

On Earth Day, I was proud to join Mothers Out Front Tompkins, students, and local groups to call for environmental actions that divest from fossil fuels and invest in transformative climate solutions. Earth Day is an opportunity for us to come together and recognize our collective environmental impact and our responsibility as stewards of this one precious planet we have. We must act to save the habitat for our species and all others on earth. I'm proud to sponsor a number of environmental bills in the Assembly, included among them: the PFAS Discharge Disclosure Act ([A3296](#)) to ensure we measure and report levels of toxic man-made modern chemicals being discharged into our waterways that destroy habitats and endanger species; the Green Affordable Pre-Electrification Fund ([A9170](#)) to help income qualifying families access home energy efficiency programs; and the Just Energy Transition Act ([A4866](#)) to transition old fossil fuel power plants into renewable energy plants. As one of the largest economies in the world, New York must continue to lead efforts that will enact crucial policies and pave the way for a more sustainable and green future for all. Watch a [video of my comments](#) from the rally.



Celebrating Parks and Natural Spaces

Spending time in nature benefits our physical and mental wellbeing, and it is critical that we preserve parks and natural spaces to benefit our entire community. While I was deep in budget work in Albany, I appreciate that my district staff were able to support the work of NYS Parks and Lime Hollow Nature Center on my behalf.

[The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation](#) celebrated 100 years, and I'm grateful my Ithaca District Office Director Cathy Emilian was able to present an official Assembly Citation marking the occasion on my behalf to Fred Bonn, Finger Lakes Regional Director. The office has grown over the years and now maintains responsibility for stewarding New York's valuable natural, historic, and cultural resources, comprising 360,000 acres of land and 250 parks, historic sites, recreational trails, golf courses and boat launches that welcome over 78 million visitors each year. A new exhibit at the Tompkins County History Center pays tribute to the legacy of Robert H. Treman, the first Commissioner of the Finger Lakes State Park system and donor of the property that ultimately became Buttermilk Falls State Park, Robert H. Treman State Park and Taughannock Falls State Park.

Lime Hollow Nature Center in Cortland celebrated its second annual Love Where You Play Stewardship Day, gathering volunteers for work projects to enhance the trails and center and ending with food and music. Cortland County is one of only a handful of NY counties that does not house a NY State Park, and Lime Hollow helps fill this critical gap with 594 acres of natural space and 13 miles of trails. My Deputy Chief of Staff, Carol Costell Corbin, joined volunteers to mulch areas and enhance the children's garden used by the after-school program and summer camp kids.



I Love My Park Day

Residents can show some love to their favorite park by volunteering for I Love My Park Day on Saturday, May 4. The day brings together thousands of volunteers from across the state to enhance and celebrate NYS's amazing parks! Projects include clean-ups, trail restoration, and tree and flower plantings. In our district, projects are planned at Taughannock Falls State Park, Stewart Park, Ithaca Dog Park, and Robert H. Treman State Park. Detailed information about each event can be found [here](#). To sign up, find your preferred location on the [interactive map](#) and click the red "Register" link. Contact the I Love My Park Web site with any questions.

I LOVE MY PARK

day

SATURDAY, MAY 4, 2024

SHOW YOUR PARK SOME LOVE! ♥

Volunteer with us on May 4 to help spruce up New York's parks, historic sites, greenway trails, and other public lands ahead of the start of summer!

Join family, friends, and neighbors to:

- ♥ Clean up park lands & beaches
- ♥ Restore trails and wildlife habitat
- ♥ Plant trees and flowers, and much more!



Register to volunteer →



New York State
Parks, Recreation and
Historic Preservation

CENTENNIAL CHALLENGE

Complete the one-time-only "Give Back on I Love My Park Day" mission to be one point closer to achieving the Centennial Challenge!

parks.ny.gov/100/challenge

We'll see you out there



Parks, Recreation
and Historic
Preservation

Department of
Environmental
Conservation

Canal
Corporation



Community Resources

New “Let’s Walk” Health and Wellness Collaboration

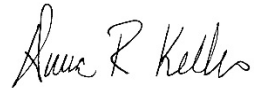
“Let’s Walk” is a new community centered healthcare approach launched by The Community Foundation of Tompkins County, Cayuga Health, and YMCA of Ithaca & Tompkins County that allows participants to engage in guided walks led by healthcare professionals and have unfiltered access to advice and resources. Let’s Walk is open to community members of all ages and fitness levels and aims to build community as well as improve overall health and wellbeing. Walks are scheduled each Wednesday at 5:30 p.m. beginning Wednesday May 1 through May 22. Participation is free of charge, but participants must commit to attending all four walks. For more information or to get involved, contact Gloria Coicou at The Community Foundation of Tompkins County Web site.



Medicare Basics Virtual Presentation

Lifelong will be hosting a free Medicare Basics presentation via Zoom on Wednesday, May 1 from 4:30 to 5:45 pm for anyone who wishes to attend. [Medicare](#) is a federally administered health insurance program that provides coverage to people 65 and older, and people under 65 who are disabled. If you would like information on different ways to receive your Medicare benefits, how Medicare works with other health insurance, or financial assistance options, consider attending the presentation via [this Zoom link](#). You may also contact Lifelong staff at their Web site or 607-273-1511 prior to the presentation if you would like presentation handouts emailed to you.

In good health,



Anna Kelles, Ph.D.

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