



## Legislative Wrap-Up

The Assembly concluded its work for this year's legislative session last week and I want to fill you in on some of the highlights. Since January, over 1,000 pieces of legislation were passed, in addition to the budget, so if I haven't included in the following summary an issue that you are interested in, please feel free to reach out and ask for an update.

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All in all, this was a very successful legislative session, and we passed many pieces of important legislation that will help address inflation and the rising cost of living, keep our communities safe, and move our upstate economy forward. As always, I welcome your thoughts and ideas. Together, we can build a better New York for us and our future.

## Economy

Inflation is affecting New Yorkers across the state and we knew it was important for us to do anything we could to help. First, a Gas Tax Holiday was established from June 1 to December 31. Second, we accelerated a planned middle-class tax cut to the lowest rate in 70 years. Next, a one-year property tax rebate program was put in place for those eligible for STAR and Enhanced STAR who earn less than \$250,000. These checks have already started going out and should be arriving in your mailbox soon if you haven't already received yours. For low-income families, the Earned Income Tax Credit has been increased. And, for families with children, there is an expanded Child Tax Credit. County taxes in Saratoga and Washington counties have long included the cost of maintaining the Hudson River/Black River Regulating District for flood control; in this year's budget we were successful in getting the state to pick up the ongoing costs of this flood mitigation effort, and this should result in a reduction of county taxes.

Seniors on a fixed income, with little to spare when their home needs a new roof or they need to add a ramp for mobility, are particularly impacted by increased costs for supplies and labor. Legislation I introduced to support home repairs for low-income seniors passed in both the Assembly and Senate with bi-partisan support.

The best way to fight inflation is by expanding good paying jobs. The Legislature passed the Green Chips Act, a bill that I have been working on for several years to provide significant incentives for semi-conductor manufacturers to locate in New York. Over the past several years I have brought legislative leaders like Speaker Carl Heastie, as well as legislative staff, to Global Foundries to learn about the industry and hear how GF in Malta has benefited the surrounding region by creating good paying jobs. With GF thinking about expansion, and other advanced manufacturing companies looking for expansion in the United States, these incentives will help make New York competitive and have the potential to be a real game-changer for our upstate economy.

The Capital Region, including Saratoga Springs, is also home to an emerging cluster of video and digital game development/production companies. These companies value the workforce being trained through programs at Capital Region BOCES, Hudson Valley Community College as well as RPI and SUNY Albany. This year's budget includes a new tax credit program to accelerate growth and hiring in this industry.

Agriculture is a large part of the economy in Washington and Saratoga Counties, as well as New York as a whole. This year's budget funds Agriculture programs at the highest levels in recent memory – boosting support for beginning and young farmers to bring in a new generation to agriculture and increasing funding for the dairy , fruits and vegetables, maple and sheep industries. I am pleased to note that I have secured funding once again for Comfort Food Community's regional Food Hub and for Pitney Meadows Community Farm's food security programs as part of this year's budget. Helping young farmers get established in the industry is critical, as the average age of New York farmers is mid-60's. Legislation expanding the Young Farmer's Student Loan Forgiveness Program to include people who have farmed for ten years or less will help farmers just starting out. Additional legislation was passed to encourage the use of industrial hemp grown in New York by businesses for purposes of packaging, construction and other uses.

A provisional cultivator license for growing adult-use cannabis was established and made available to licensed hemp farmers. About a half dozen farmers in the 113th Assembly District applied for and received their cultivator license and are in the process of planting their first crop.

I also authored and passed, along with Senator Hinchey, the New York Textile Act to accelerate the growth of the sustainably produced textile industry that our region is becoming known for. New York is uniquely positioned to take advantage of the consumer preference for sustainable wool and plant fibers like hemp and bast (a form of linen), and this legislation will encourage the further development of the supply chain to connect upstate growers and producers with buyers from the fashion companies in New York City.

Small businesses are still fighting their way back to pre-pandemic levels of business, and the budget this year continued to provide financial support to help them cover extraordinary costs associated with the pandemic. [\(return to top\)](#)

## Public Safety

My goal going into this session was to work on restoring a fair and functional criminal justice system that will help keep our communities safe. Throughout 2021, I met with law enforcement, district attorneys and judges to identify problems with our criminal justice system and what the solutions might be. Working closely with other upstate Assembly members, we were successful in making important changes to our laws to restore judicial discretion in bail decisions, ensure that the discovery rules do not result in dismissal of charges, and ensure upstate District Attorneys have the funding necessary to effectively do their work.

Specifically:

- All crimes involving possession of an illegal firearm are now bail eligible
- Second and subsequent offenses are now bail eligible, regardless of whether the second offense is in the same jurisdiction as the first
- Judges may now consider a broader set of criteria when setting a securing order, including:
  - Past history and activities
  - Criminal conviction record
  - Whether an individual is alleged to have caused serious harm to an individual or group of individuals
  - Previous record with respect to flight (non-return to court)
  - Ability to pay, if setting bail

The District Attorneys Association of the State of New York supported the changes that were made, saying in their memo of support “This year’s Budget demonstrates a willingness towards finding solutions to protect victims and to ensure the safety of all of New York State’s businesses, residents and visitors.”

The horrendous mass shooting in Buffalo, fueled by racism and hate, followed by another heartbreaking school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, lead the Governor and the legislature to adopt a package of bills to limit access to high capacity firearms as well as begin to hold social media companies who permit hate-filled posts on their platform accountable. Although I did not support all of the bills that were put forward, I wholeheartedly agree with the intent to ensure that firearms are limited to those who have the capacity to handle them responsibly, particularly firearms that are capable of inflicting injury and death on a mass scale. Balancing the rights of people to be safe from harm when they go to the grocery store and to know their children are safe at school with the rights of people to own guns for self-defense or for hunting is a delicate but critical task, and one that I take very seriously. There are three questions I ask when looking at bills related to gun safety or gun violence prevention to try to achieve this balance: does this

bill take guns out of the hands of criminals or does it make criminals out of law-abiding citizens; is the firearm of concern defined specifically and accurately in the bill language; and is the law written to be enforceable so that it will have the desired effect. Some of the bills in the package targeted crime guns and were drafted with both specificity and enforceability, and others, in my opinion, were not.

In addition to the package of gun violence legislation, the legislature passed “Alyssa’s Law” requiring each school district to consider adding silent alarm “panic buttons” wired into the 911 system. In places where there is spotty cell coverage, like parts of Washington County and other rural areas, a silent alarm wired into the 911 system could make all the difference. Should a school district decide to implement a silent alarm system, the district can be reimbursed for most of the cost through the standard Building Construction Aid provided by the State.

I am pleased to report that I was successful in securing Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance grants for the Saratoga Springs Police Department for community outreach programs and for the Hudson Falls Police Department to help cover the cost of a new undercover vehicle. At the suggestion of Washington County Sheriff Jeff Murphy, I introduced legislation to provide an incentive for law enforcement agencies to seek accreditation – a comprehensive process that helps police agencies evaluate and improve their overall performance. It passed with bi-partisan support in the Assembly, and I hope the Senate will take it up next year. [\(return to top\)](#)

## Education

We also significantly increased school funding in this year’s budget. Universal pre-K funding increased across the 113<sup>th</sup> Assembly district by 41% and our local school districts saw an increase of between 3 and 18 percent depending on their level of need. Additionally, non-public schools will receive an increase in funding for STEM programs and libraries will see an increase in funding this year. And part-time students at SUNY universities and colleges, including adult students studying for new job credentials, will be eligible to receive Tuition Assistance (TAP) grants.

Student mental health is a significant concern. This past winter I invited each of our local school district superintendents and school board chairs to meet with me, and several districts took me up on the invitation. The top issue for each of these schools was how the year-plus of remote learning and social isolation had impacted the students as they returned to full-time in-person instruction in the classroom. This year’s budget included a significant allocation of \$100 million over two years to increase the availability of mental health services in schools to address this need. [\(return to top\)](#)

## Healthcare

As I write this email, I can’t help but recall that last year at this time the pandemic was still dominating the news and healthcare was a top-of-mind concern for many. This year with the pandemic waning, exhausted healthcare providers – aides, nurses, and physicians – are retiring or otherwise leaving their jobs and many hospitals, nursing homes, and doctor’s offices are

struggling to fill open positions. I visited Glens Falls Hospital this past week, and they have openings for 200 nurses. And that is just one organization! This year's budget includes retention bonuses for front-line health and mental health workers and wage increases for workers who provide in-home care to the disabled community and to seniors. Nurses Across New York student loan forgiveness program is expanded to try to attract more people to the field of nursing, particularly in underserved areas like our rural counties.

Nursing homes operate on a shoestring budget in the best of years. And 2020 and 2021 were far from the best of years. This year's budget increased the Medicaid reimbursement rate, restoring cuts that had been made in 2020 and increasing the rate by an additional percentage. The safe staffing level requirements that went into effect last year to improve patient/resident care have increased costs for nursing homes and monies have been allocated to defray some of those increased costs.

The shift to Telehealth as an alternative to an in-person office visit has been a real benefit to patients who live in rural communities or have transportation challenges. With the increase in telehealth usage, physicians and mental health practitioners have shared with me that more patients are getting regular care and that is a positive step. But insurance companies have been reluctant to pay providers the same rate for a telehealth visit as for an in-person office visit creating a disincentive for providers to offer telehealth as an option. I authored a bill to require insurance companies to reimburse for an office visit – whether it is in person or via telehealth – at the same rate, and this bill was incorporated into the final budget. Telehealth is a valuable tool to help everyone access their healthcare provider and insurance shouldn't, and now won't, get in the way.

The increase in mental health issues is leading to a range of other problems – from classroom issues to homelessness. This year's budget expanded funding for Mental Health treatment facilities, marking the first investment in residential treatment in many years. A bill that I co-sponsored expanded the mental health professions that can diagnose as well as treat a mental illness, and this should help expand the number of practitioners available to work with individuals in need around the state.

Anticipating the Supreme Court decision affecting the future of reproductive choice, the legislature took steps to put in place legal protections for out-of-state women seeking abortion services in New York and for the New York-based providers who assist them.

The increasing cost, and lack of transparency in the out-of-pocket costs, of prescription drugs is a significant issue, particularly for seniors on a fixed income. The Elderly Pharmaceutical Insurance Coverage (EPIC) program has long been a safety net to help seniors with the financial burden of the range of prescriptions medications they take. Cost-of-living adjustments in Social Security or a private pension can suddenly cut off eligibility for the EPIC program, even though the increase in income doesn't come close to making it possible for the individual to cover the cost of their medicine. A bill passed this legislative session to allow seniors to retain their eligibility in the EPIC program if they have previously qualified but are no longer eligible because of an increase in a public or private pension or social security benefit. Additional legislation was passed that requires that patients be provided with their specific prescription drug

out-of-pocket costs details, personalized to their health plan, when they are prescribed, so that patients have a better understanding of the costs and can evaluate alternatives. [\(return to top\)](#)

## Environment

Significant funding was provided in this year's budget for programs to mitigate the effects of climate change and reduce further effects, including flood mitigation, expanding electric vehicle (EV) charging stations in publicly available locations, funding for green building projects and zero emission busses. Land conservation continues to be a priority, as does water quality improvement and infrastructure.

On your ballot in November, you will have the opportunity to vote on whether the state should issue \$4.2 billion in an Environmental Bond to fund further programs to address climate change issues and environmental concerns.

We also passed legislation to require NYSERDA (NYS Energy Research Development Authority) to develop a statewide plan for EV fast charging stations. The lack of a comprehensive network of fast charging stations is one of the major impediments to consumers when they think about shifting from a gas-powered car to an EV. A hearing was held on this topic earlier in the year and, at my invitation, a representative from Stewarts' provided testimony regarding the commercial expansion of charging stations.

Other legislative actions included updating building codes and energy efficiency standards to match the state's climate policy goals and limiting pesticides that are harmful to pollinators. [\(return to top\)](#)

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## Additional Highlights



I hosted Habitat for Humanity House Build at the Capital in May, to call attention to the need for attainable housing for all income levels.



I formed a Student Advisory Board in September 2021, with students from each high school, SUNY ADK and Skidmore. We met quarterly and the last meeting was at the Capitol where I introduced them on the floor of the Assembly.

The house was constructed on the West Capital Lawn by volunteers from 25 Habitat affiliates from around the state. At the end of the day, it was disassembled and will be reassembled for a family in Glens Falls.



The Stillwater High School Participation in Government class visited the Capital and we spent an hour together discussing how the legislative process works and how a bill becomes a law.

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