

Mayor's Column

June 27, 2016

The New York State Legislative Session came to a close last week after six months of convening in Albany. Some are dubbing the 2016 months the "Seinfeld Session" or "All About Nothing."

One of twenty states with a politically divided Legislature, New York has 63 State Senators and 150 Assemblypersons.

Chief on the to do docket was ethics reform in a year that's seen two former legislative leaders sentenced to prison as well as ongoing state and federal probes of the Governor's current economic development programs. Leaving dozens of other ethics reform bills in committee, the Legislature did agree that lawmakers convicted of felonies will be stripped of their pensions.

Since 2000, 40 lawmakers have faced legal or ethical violations with 21 of them sentenced to prison or house arrest. As it is said about the New York State Legislature, every year seems to be the year for real ethics reform until it is not.

Legislation of substance that was bipartisan in passage included more stringent tests for the detection of lead in school district water supplies; increased access to mammograms; improved safety at railroad crossings; greater parity in legal defense for the indigent; restrictions on the outlets for dispensing of heroin and opiates and a focus on treatment, rather than incarceration for the drug addicted.

Besides the above, in the grand scheme of things, bipartisan agreement was reached on other subjects with little nexus to the everyday lives of New Yorkers.

As examples, alcohol can now be served on Sundays at 10am instead of noon. There is even a bill provision providing that if an important sporting event is being played on European time, alcohol service can start at 8 am. A bill permitting the serving of alcohol in movie theatres did not make it out of the committee.

The practice of mixed martial arts as a sport was legalized as was daily fantasy sports betting. In addition, dog owners may now be buried with their pets if granted permission from their cemetery.

Bills of major impact to specific regions include the extension of the Mayor of New York City's control over the public school system for one year, not the three year extension requested by the Mayor. Counties north of the New York Metropolitan area lost on their bid to have UBER and LYFT as transportation choices in their communities. The bill was opposed by the powerful trifecta of the taxi drivers' union, the insurance company lobby and the trial lawyers association.

Of direct effect on our Village was a small but important bill carried by our Legislators Paulin and Latimer that permits resident on-street overnight parking in the area of Kensington Road until the Kensington development parking garage is completed. Hard to believe, permission to do this on local streets must be approved by the State Legislature followed by the Governor's signature.

My colleagues in Westchester and I were successful in urging the defeat of a bill that had a potentially profound impact on all Westchester communities serviced by Metro North.

If passed, the bill would have exempted Metro North from compliance with local planning and zoning code regulations/restrictions on their properties along the rail line. Their retail space could have been rented without community restrictions or preferences.

The \$15 minimum wage will have a definite impact on small local business owners. What it does to their operations and viability remains to be seen. What some forget is the ripple effect in a business on every other employee in a supervisory role by raising the lowest paid employees' hourly salary by 67%. As example, the employee currently making \$15 an hour supervising minimum wage staff will have a logical expectation of a major salary increase as well.

As an avid follower of the legislative process, I noticed that more bills were passed in the last 24 hours of the session than were passed during January and February combined.

Prior to the final week, 200 bills had been passed; five days later 554 bills were enacted. Most were done with no public scrutiny and in the dark of night.

For some of these bills, the Governor had to issue a “message of necessity” to avoid the State’s three day “aging” requirement meant to give lawmakers a chance to read, digest and debate the legislation before voting.

Most observers agreed the only “necessity” was summer.

Rather than lose faith though, perhaps we should be thankful for the Seinfeld Session and adopt Mark Twain’s view that, “No man’s life, liberty or property are safe while the legislature is in session.”