Rockland County Legislator Frank Sparaco

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Legislator Frank Sparaco and Michael Reagan

Sparaco: Eliminate Salaries For County Leaders

As a Rockland County Legislator, I was proud to propose a groundbreaking resolution calling for the elimination of the salaries of the Rockland County Executive and the members of the Rockland County Legislature until the entire deficit of Rockland County is eliminated.

This resolution highlights the concern I have expressed for years over the state of the increasing deficit, and the need to focus on budget reform and reducing Rockland's tax burden. It is the most far-reaching proposal to come from any branch of Rockland government to address the incredibly growing deficit.

It is my opinion that until we are able to right our wrongs and put the county back on the right fiscal track, none of us should accept a paycheck from taxpayers.

If you take away the financial incentive of elected officials to continue business as usual, we can change things. Rockland County has the lowest bond rating of any county, and is in need of real leadership. This legislation will provide just that.

Sparaco Says No To 2014 Budget

For years, Rockland County has seen its budget deficit increase while its leaders have done little to stop it or prevent it from worsening. In fact, to date, virtually nothing has been done to eliminate the deficit.

The one measure that passed pertaining to paying down the deficit was a $96 million bond that, in theory, was supposed to cover the entire deficit that existed.

From the time that the bond measure was passed in the Rockland County Legislature until the day it was signed by the governor, Rockland's deficit increased by over $30 million!

While others were hailing the governor's signature on the deficit bond proposal, I realized that we now have two deficits to pay down: The original $96 million deficit, and the new $30 million+ deficit, which is growing daily.

In the 2014 budget, no funds were set aside to pay down the deficit, begging the question as to when exactly the county is going to get real about the deficit and finally pay it off.

The budget did include funding the government in a business-as-usual manner, with no significant cuts that could protect us from further deficits and no mechanism to repay our old debts.

On top of that, the budget included a proposal to increase taxes by almost 10%. On every level, therefore, this budget– like others in the past– is a flawed budget, and one that I could not support.

Old issues, including that of the fate of Summit Park—remain undecided. Small progress is made, but the time such progress takes is more than taxpayers can afford.

I will continue to fight for fiscal discipline and responsible budgeting, and I will continue to fight against wasteful spending, higher taxes, and the endless cycle of failed policies that got us to where we are today. I know that we can do better than band-aid fixes to problems that require long-term solutions.

Summit Park: Sparaco's Proposal Right All Along

For the last several years, Rockland County has not made a firm decision on what to do with the Summit Park Nursing Home and Hospital. From the time these discussions were raised, I advocated for the sale of both the nursing home and hospital to reduce our deficit and our debt.

The county created a Local Development Corporation with the initial intention of selling the nursing home. However, they recently began to consider selling the associated hospital as well.

Had we sold both years ago, our deficit would be smaller and so would your taxes. I applaud the idea—though it is late in coming—to sell both the nursing home and hospital. Selling both will reduce our deficit by millions, and remove over a third of our employees from payroll, putting us on the path to recovery.

Fighting For Rockland Businesses Like Brega Transportation

Over two years ago, Rockland County put out a bid for a bus company to operate its bus lines. The contract was for roughly $70 million. Brega Transportation, a local business, attempted to place a bid on the contract. However, the county executive's administration repeatedly wrongfully disqualified his bid.

I set to work with my colleagues in the county to determine why obstacles were placed in his way. After the bids were returned, Brega came in with the lowest bid.

I proudly went against the county executive and others twice to vote to award the contract to Brega. Finally, in May 2012, the contract with Brega was agreed to. It saved taxpayers $7 million, created jobs, and stimulated the local economy by keeping $70 million in Rockland—all of which went to our legislative district.

However, the fight for the contract did not end there. Coach USA filed a lawsuit against Brega in a last ditch effort to keep their contract with Rockland. Fortunately, a judge dismissed the lawsuit and a transition was put into place for Brega to take over the county bus system.

In the beginning of November, Brega began managing all the bus routes, and in a few weeks, not only did we see minimal problems because of the transition, but bus routes were more timely than they were before the Brega changeover.

Looking back at this major issue, I am proud to have stood by a local business and worked to ensure they would get a fair chance to partner with the county. Additionally, this move kept tens of millions of dollars in Rockland's economy, and will be a great improvement for transportation for years to come.

Local businesses provide jobs to area residents, promote economic development through the course of everyday business, and infuse local governments with needed tax revenue. As a county legislator, I have always believed that when businesses prosper in Rockland—no matter their size or service—every taxpayer benefits.

Fighting Taxes From Day One

Since I became your legislator in January 2008, I have always fought against tax hikes and new taxes. Most people lose sight of all the taxes that exist and focus on property taxes, but I have been fighting against that and many other kinds of taxes.

Near the beginning of my time in office, an outrageous proposal was made to create a tax on the use of shopping bags in supermarkets. The tax would be a 25-cent surcharge on each bag used during checkouts.

Another tax was a proposed hotel/motel tax, which would have added a whopping 6% on to the bill of every person who stays overnight in Rockland. I opposed this tax because of the incredible impact it would have on Rockland's businesses and the already weak tourist economy.

When the deficit began to soar, instead of looking at ways of cutting costs, elected officials spent their time coming up with new ways of taxing people.

One of the new proposed taxes was a "Transfer Tax." This was a tax levied on residents who sold their homes. For every $1,000 they received in the sales price, they would have to pay a $4 transfer tax that would go to Rockland County.

Unfortunately, the county was able to pass a "Heating Tax," which added a 4% tax to all home energy bills. Another tax increase that passed was a 30 cent a month increase on the cell phone tax. Taxing the necessities of families because government does not want to make the tough decisions it needs to is inexcusable.

A new car tax was also proposed on all vehicles in Rockland that would amount to $5—$10 depending on the vehicle type.

A doubling of the mortgage tax would have made it impossible for struggling families who needed to refinance their homes to do so—but that did not stop it from being proposed.

I have always fought these kind of tax proposals—and as long as I am your legislator—I always will.

Leading A Bi-Partisan Effort to Eliminate Chargebacks

Over one year ago, I worked in a bi-partisan way to eliminate the so-called chargeback costs that the county had passed onto the towns.

In an effort to raise more funds for the emptying county coffers, county leaders established a charge that they would pass on to towns for the cost of elections. They also passed down a little-known charge relating to the community colleges that Rockland residents attended outside of Rockland.

Each chargeback would have resulted in millions of town tax dollars being taken from the towns and put into the county treasury. This passing of the buck, as I saw it, needed to be revoked.

I always opposed these chargebacks, because I believed they were a gimmick that did nothing to solve Rockland's real financial woes. Taxpayers were still responsible for the expenses, and would have paid them through their town taxes instead of their county taxes. That is not the kind of real solution we need in Rockland.

That is why I was delighted to join my colleagues across the aisle to end this debate between towns and the county and remove the chargebacks from the town's balance sheets.

Legislator Sparaco proposing legislation to end chargebacks alongside two of his Democratic colleagues in the Legislature.

The legislation proposed had the support of all five town supervisors and their boards, and would have improved the county's relationship with the towns. However, many fought our proposal or backed away from it after it was released.

After much debate, we were able to pass and enforce an end to the chargebacks relating to the community colleges, which was the larger chargeback cost to municipalities. I will continue to work to end all chargebacks and advocate for a more responsible county government that solves its own problems and doesn't force others to solve those problems for them.

Celebrating Our Community

As a Rockland County Legislator, I take great pride in acknowledging members of the community who have demonstrated achievements in a wide range of areas. From student scholars and athletes, to local heroes, I applaud all those who make our community a better place for all of us, and instill in us a great sense of pride.

I regularly acknowledge these worthy individuals in the beginning of meetings of the full legislature, and present them with awards on behalf of the county. I am always proud to address my colleagues during these brief ceremonies about their hard work and achievements.

Recently, I presented Congers resident and businessman Charles Kemmlein with a Distinguished Service Award in honor of forty-one years of business ownership in the town of Clarkstown.

Mr. Kemmlein served in the Navy before establishing the Kemmlein Furniture Corporation. He moved to Congers and retired in November 2013. His work and sacrifice are an example to all.

In December, I recognized Charles Kemmlein at the County Legislature for his service. His family attended the ceremony.

Some of the past awardees include:

- Rockland County Big Brothers/Big Sisters
- Clarkstown Councilman George Hoehmann
- Rockland County Sheriff's Officers
- Clarkstown Police Officers
- The Nyack High School Mock Trial Team
- The Nyack High School Chamber Orchestra
- The Nyack High School Marching Band
- The Valley Cottage Indian Cheerleaders
- The Valley Cottage Jr. Pee Wee Football Team
- Outstanding Students of Nyack High School
- Outstanding Students of Nyack Middle School

Saying No To 158% In Property Tax Increases In Six Years

The largest increase in taxes levied by the county over the last several years has come in the form of the property tax. In prior years, property taxes were kept stable.

Part of the reason for that is the fact that the county relies on both the property and sales taxes for the bulk of its revenue. However, sales tax revenues were supposed to account for far more of the revenue than the property tax.

As a result of the decline in sales tax revenue, county government looked to the property tax to make up the shortfall in revenue, rather than cut expenses responsibly as I proposed.

For years, I have advocated against the increase in the property tax, because as a homeowner, I know all too well the crushing burdens the property tax places on everyone, particularly the property tax charged from the local school district.

Towns, and for those who live in them, villages, as well as the sewer district, local library, lighting district, ambulance district, fire district also pile on property taxes, so that the total tax bill has become enormous.

The county property tax has historically been one of the smallest parts of the property taxes that residents pay, and since I took office, I have worked to keep it small.

The dysfunction of county government is seen most clearly through its handling of the property tax rates.

Since I have been in the legislature, there has been an increase in the property tax built in to every budget. I stood tall to fight to take that increase out of the budget, and when some refused to do so, I proudly voted against every budget and the accompanying tax increase.

Over the last five years, the property tax rate has increased from $1.1145 in 2008 to $2.88 in 2014, totaling a 158% increase in the tax rate.

Here are the yearly figures:

- 2009: 15% property tax hike
- 2010: 6% property tax hike
- 2011: 11% property tax hike
- 2012: 36% property tax hike
- 2013: 22% property tax hike
- 2014: 9.9% property tax hike

Of course, in order to do so, the county had to bypass Governor Cuomo's newly enacted tax cap law, which was supposed to keep local governments from increasing property taxes more than 2% a year. I have always voted against breaking that cap.

This coming year, I will work with those colleagues of mine who also believe that the approach of raising property taxes each year is not the right one. I have always kept my pledge to vote against any bill that would increase taxes in any way.

Sparaco Elected Deputy Minority Leader

This year, I was elected unanimously by my colleagues to serve as the Deputy Minority Leader of the legislature. This position places me in the leadership of the legislature, and enables me to determine the priorities and agenda of the county legislature.

I will certainly continue to champion conservative causes such as fiscal discipline and lower taxes. This is my second straight year as Deputy, and I served for two years as Minority Leader before that.

I also look forward to working with our new County Executive, Ed Day. I worked well with him when he was a legislator, and I know that with him as our County Executive, we can help shape a new future and a better direction for our county.

Being Deputy Minority Leader also greatly enhances my ability to serve the people of my legislative district, which has always been my top priority in office. As minority leader and as your legislator, I am continuing to look out for your interests, and improve the quality of life and government that you deserve.

Opposing The Desalination Plant

United Water has proposed building a $110+ million water desalination facility in Haverstraw. Their plan is to take water from the Hudson River and use that for drinking water.

From the beginning, I have forcefully opposed this plan for many reasons. Taking water from the Hudson poses severe health risks, as the water has been tainted by radioactive substances from nearby Indian Point.

An examination of desalination plants built across the country has shown that in many cases, the actual cost for the plants far exceed the initial estimates by tens of millions of dollars. At the same time, while costs for the plant are always underestimated, the amount of water that the plant can produce is usually overestimated. Ultimately, the amount of water produced is a fraction of what the water companies promised, forcing ratepayers to pay millions for less water.

The proposed desalination plant is bad for water and bad for ratepayers. Here in Rockland, United Water has sent so much of our water to New Jersey, and has no plans to end that practice. I will continue to oppose this plant, and will work with other officials to do everything possible to stop it from being built.