

# Fill budget gap but also overhaul county's way of doing business



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It is truly unfortunate that Monroe County legislator and deputy majority leader Dan Quatro, R-Webster, in a Speaking Out essay of April 25 embraced such an inflammatory tone in his defense of the Republican craving for increased taxes. Many of us believe that increasing taxes would be particularly destructive to the economic development efforts of our region. But we also believe that having an honest debate on addressing the budget crisis is exactly what the people deserve.

Let's review the facts: 19 percent. That's the sales tax increase that County Executive Maggie Brooks has proposed to fix the ongoing financial problems plaguing this county. The proposed increase would give us the unenviable status of having the second highest sales tax rate in New York state. This is not a situation that will allow for economic growth to flourish in Monroe County. Our county

sales tax rate will be 58 percent higher than that in neighboring Ontario County.

Unfortunately, this kind of fiscal crisis is not new for Republican administrations. Monroe County has been running deficits for at least five years and has raised the property tax levy four times to address it. A sales tax increase is bad for this community. It will stifle economic growth and strap working families. As fuel prices soar to more than \$3 per gallon, how can we possibly ask hardworking people to pay even more on top of that?

Democrats in the County Legislature have come up with a plan that would not only address the deficit without a tax increase but also fix long-term inequities in the county budget. Our "Blueprint for Progress" would end business as usual.

Republicans attack the fact that our plan addresses the way sheriff's road patrol services are funded. Accordingly, to the degree that many sheriff's services are available to all county residents, all county taxpayers should shoulder those costs. These would include things like airport security, marine/parks security, tactical units and vic-

tim assistance, among other services.

Road patrol services, however, are not available to all county residents. If you live in a jurisdiction with its own police department and call 911, your call will be forwarded to your own police department. The problem is that people in these towns are paying as much for road patrol services as those in the towns that have road patrol services available to them. Unfortunately, the Republicans have mischaracterized this as metro police. Nowhere does the Democratic plan call for a metro police force. In fact, the opposite is actually true. The Democratic plan ends the current double taxation burden on municipalities with their own police departments, strengthening the motivation for maintaining strong local police forces.

We have proposed that the county Water Authority use a portion of its annual profit to help offset the need for tax increases. The Republican op-ed piece suggests that the Water Authority shouldn't have to "sacrifice," missing the realization that it doesn't belong to the authority but to the ratepayers, and it is appropriate for surplus-

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es to go to our benefit. The city of Rochester's water department contributes about \$6 million a year to the city coffers. It is true that this change would require state legislative action — so let's call for it. Remember, the Republican sales tax increase would require state legislative action too. We must have the will to change business as usual in Monroe County.

In other areas, too, when the suggestion is made that "we can't do that" because of existing law, if the law no longer makes sense, let's motivate ourselves to reform it. Electronic bidding is a great case in point. Republicans concede that this element of our plan can save millions but apparently are unwilling to reform the law to allow for the benefits of new technologies. Looking at fundamentally changing what has long been taken for granted is the basis of our plan. The implementation of our plans, some of which we mention here, will take a lot of hard work. A sales tax increase is, in many respects, the easy way out. But our constituents are telling us, loudly and clearly, that the "easy way out" is killing us.

It's time for a new direction. □

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