

## **Cameron: It's time for Long Island to act**

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Gov. Andrew Cuomo's many accomplishments in his first year of office appear to have given him the confidence to move forward with more ambitious initiatives: Casino gambling, the nation's largest convention center, infrastructure investment, an energy transmission grid, economic development grants and education and pension reforms are just some of the major tenets of the governor's 2012 agenda as outlined in his recent State-of-the-State address.

Typical for these addresses, it was long on promise and short on detail and we look forward to a better sense of how these initiatives will impact near-term employment growth.

But it's clear that Albany cannot and will not resolve all the challenges we face here on Long Island.

**The following 12 action items are part of the Long Island Regional Planning Council's 25-year Sustainability Plan,** which outlines the strategies that can enable the Island to prosper, grow and remain viable for our children and our children's children.

It is important that these initiatives move forward this year.

- 1. Foster Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education programs in our schools.** In the flat world in which we now compete, let our best and brightest be afforded the opportunity to access programs that facilitate their acceptance into the best colleges in the country. Virtual or online programs can be developed to enable students in underprivileged communities and others that do not have STEM programs to be afforded comparable opportunities.
- 2. Incentivize and support the building of rental housing units.** Long Island's rental housing stock comprises 17 percent of the total housing available. Westchester County and suburban New Jersey communities have double that percentage. It is no wonder that Long Island is losing its young people at an alarming rate. If we are to have affordable living places for our young work force and our empty nesters, it is critical that more rental housing be created, preferably in our downtowns, proximate to mass-transit options. In order to facilitate this, town and village zoning authorities should create overlay districts which can provide developers the certainty necessary for the type and density of development that would be permitted.
- 3. Streamline government permitting and approval processes** for significant projects. For major projects with regional significance, the myriad government jurisdictions force potential developers and companies to navigate a costly and time-consuming process including the State Environmental Quality Review Act and other environmental reviews, municipal zoning requirements, state and local health permits, transportation approvals and tax and business permits. Pre-permitting and an expedited review process are necessary if we are to move projects from the drawing boards to construction.
- 4. Pursue consolidation of functions rather than forms of government.** With over 900 taxing authorities on Long Island and the various functions they perform, there exists numerous opportunities for increases in efficiency. While the counties, some towns and school districts have started to work on sharing services and collective purchasing, much more needs to be done.
- 5. Investigate a regionalized employment structure for school district employees.** This can potentially achieve cost savings and equitable access by all school districts to the most qualified personnel. Long Island's property taxes currently average 8 percent of average median income. Without major changes, that number will grow to 14 percent in 2035. With school taxes comprising approximately two-thirds of property taxes and over 70 percent of school costs attributed to labor and associated benefits, it is critical that something be done to curb the costs of our educational system. The issue of equity in access for our poorer communities is also of regional concern and a call to action.
- 6. Increase our investment in the Island's infrastructure.** With double-digit annual increases in the costs of public pensions and health insurance, the piece of the budget pie allocated for infrastructure investment has been shrinking. With our roads, bridges and water infrastructure deteriorating, our quality of life not only becomes threatened but so does our economic well-being. With more than 35 percent of the Island's construction trades currently unemployed and interest rates at historic lows, there exists a strong argument to increase investment now in public infrastructure.
- 7. Pursue establishing Long Island as a federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization.** Federal transportation funding is allocated through the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council, which serves as the MPO for the greater New York metropolitan area, including Long Island. Our share of funding has typically been dwarfed by the needs of New York City, leaving little for Long Island's intra-Island needs. Only 11 percent of the MPOs in the United States represent populations in excess of 1 million people, suggesting Long Island could compete well on its own against the rest of the country in demonstrating the return on investment for the billions of dollars funded annually by the federal government for transportation projects. The recent success of Long Island in the governor's economic development competition is a good indication of our demonstrated need and leadership capability.
- 8. Develop a regional energy strategy and energy conservation programs.** The Long Island Power Authority's recent selection of PSE&G to operate its transmission and distribution system affords the opportunity for the authority to move aggressively toward a more efficient power grid. With the Island's energy costs being the third-highest in the nation, that cost structure provides a major opportunity to provide the capital investment necessary to cost-effectively reduce the amount of energy consumed and thereby lower energy costs. The governor's commitment for a major power transmission cable to serve downstate communities demonstrates the state's recognition of this need.
- 9. Petition the governor to charge his proposed education task force to address consistently poor-performing school districts.** Regrettably, the number of failing schools on Long Island is growing. A consortium of representatives of School Superintendents Association, School Boards Association, the New York State Union of Teachers, BOCES and the Long Island Regional Planning Council collectively identified this problem as one of the highest educational priorities here on Long Island.
- 10. Implement the "Long Island First" initiative.** Bills were enacted by both county Legislatures and signed into law by the county executives to develop a comprehensive initiative to support, promote and prioritize the purchase of Long Island products, goods and services, and establish a framework for the networking of local producers and consumers. This initiative championed by Suffolk Legis. Wayne Horsley and Nassau Legis. Denise Ford recognizes the problem of the export of our economy and the direct and indirect benefits of reinvesting in local companies and their products.
- 11. Devise a program for the remediation and development of contaminated properties** on Long Island. Over 6,000 properties lie fallow on Long Island. Jobs will be created, properties restored to the tax rolls and the environment protected with a successful brownfield remediation program.

**12. Support our federal, state and local elected officials to make the difficult decisions necessary to reduce the costs of government. The costs of educating our young people, insuring the health of those in need and managing the retirement benefits of our public employees must all be effectively controlled if we are to bring our taxes under control and achieve a sustainable Long Island for the foreseeable future.**

*We have much to do to preserve the quality of life we treasure here on Long Island. Addressing these 12 items in 2012 would be a great start. We no longer have time to wait.*