



Among the issues Albany has put off is a cap on property taxes. Erie County's director of real property tax services, Joseph Maciejewski, shows boxes of bills. Charles Lewis/Buffalo News file photo

More to do

Cuomo, lawmakers leave much undone with budget agreement

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Lest Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and state lawmakers risk injury patting themselves on the back, let us offer some perspective here: Passing a budget by April 1 is what's supposed to happen in New York.

That it has become the exception, not the rule, is the recurring April Fool's Day joke on state residents. What is more, the governor and legislators still have plenty of work cut out for them.

Yes, the \$132.5 billion budget wisely trims spending, and it steers clear of tax increases and borrowing gimmicks, unlike in past years. It closes a deficit of \$10 billion.

But Cuomo and lawmakers also avoided some of the most contentious issues. They put off, for example, consideration of medical malpractice award limits, a property tax cap and UB 2020.

The latter two initiatives could help lift Western New York from its lingering economic doldrums and turn around the area's massive population losses.

Cuomo and some State Senate leaders say UB 2020 is still alive, and the governor has pledged to convene a summit later this year to examine the proposal more closely.

But unless the plan to increase the university's autonomy, grow its student body and increase its spinoff development potential gets some real backing soon, it is more on track to become UB 2040.

Meanwhile, the region's population erodes further, with talented young people leaving for more hospitable job markets and longtime residents fleeing to escape suffocating property taxes.

Without a cap in place, those taxes could very well go up again -- as local governments and school districts address fallout from the state's cuts.

Regarding lawsuits, the lack of any controls over non-economic damages -- pain and suffering -- has bloated malpractice insurance rates, driven doctors out of practice here and fomented the expensive practice of defensive medicine. A \$250,000 cap had been proposed in Cuomo's budget. We're not sure that is the best solution, but it was a place from which to negotiate. That still must happen.

With his landslide victory in November, Cuomo had a mandate to begin cleaning up a mess years in the making. He went about it in an orderly and mostly cooperative fashion, and when the most difficult items were removed from consideration, legislators fell in line quickly with the governor's proposals.

The hard part begins now. Some local human service agencies, already struggling with mounting demand for their programs, will see state funds cut way back or in some cases eliminated altogether.

Who picks up that slack?

School districts in Erie County will get \$27.5 million less in state aid than they currently receive. Class sizes in some districts are already unwieldy, and superintendents have talked about the possibility of having to cut teachers.

And one of Western New York's major economic drivers, the health care industry, will be getting less Medicaid -- thanks to a statewide decrease of \$337 million for next year and a spending increase cap going forward.

Still, few people would argue with a straight face that the state was spending within its means, and cuts were avoidable.

The belt-tightening was not only necessary but long overdue. It's up to the governor and the leaders of the Assembly and Senate to keep the momentum going.

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