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State University of New York Chancellor Nancy Zimpher discusses the new SUNY Strategic Plan.
Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News

Pass university reforms

Assembly roadblock thwarts upstate and sidelines a key economic hope

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Count on Assemblyman Mark Schroeder to tell it straight. The Buffalo Democrat on Wednesday laid into Speaker Sheldon Silver for blocking a bill that would let the University at Buffalo and other SUNY campuses become the economic powerhouses that upstate needs them to be.

Not only is Silver hindering the region's development through his obstructionism, but Schroeder says the speaker is also breaking a promise to support the bill if SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher endorsed it. Zimpher has, emphatically, yet the bill remains bottled up in the Assembly. Silver could move it along, but he won't. What is this man trying to do?

Reports are that downstate members oppose letting campuses set their own tuition rates, a key part of the bill, because it could jeopardize the ability of poor New Yorkers to go to college. It's not an unreasonable concern, but the answer is to deal with the issue, not to reject a visionary program that could jump-start the upstate economy and, not insignificantly, make upstate less dependent on tax dollars generated downstate. That's what a leader would do. It's not what Silver is doing.

Indeed, the speaker seems devoted to nothing greater than maintaining the disastrous status quo. In a time of economic crisis, he has proposed nothing bold or new. In fact, by obstructing passage of the SUNY plan, Silver is actively opposing what is bold and new ... and hopeful. It's not much of an agenda.

Upstate can't take more of the Assembly's same-old ... high taxes, addiction to debt, slavish devotion to the unions, opposition to change. Democrats won the presidency in 2008 by promising change. State Democrats ... those in the Assembly, at least ... don't much like talking about change. They like things as they are. That's what keeps the speaker happy.

Schroeder is a notable exception. Plainly, he isn't in this just for the paycheck. He is willing to put

himself at risk when that is what is needed, but he's unlikely to change Silver's approach by himself. His Democratic ... and Republican ... colleagues need to step up. The Western New York delegation has pushed Silver on this matter, but it hasn't worked yet.

Sam Hoyt, Crystal Peoples, Dennis Gabryszak and Francine DelMonte ... the area's Assembly Democrats ... need to follow suit and put their standing at risk. Surely Schroeder isn't the only Assembly Democrat with the nerve to cross Silver. If he is, upstate might as well turn out the lights, because nothing will change here until something changes there. And there's that word again.

This bill is good for upstate. It's good for downstate. If it has defects, they can be fixed. Silver needs to get right with it or step down. New York needs leadership. It's time for everyone to get serious.



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