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## Today's Front Page



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## News

### Leaders dish on strategic incentives

Politicians gather at Legislative Breakfast

By Paul M. Crossman

HUDSON

— The Columbia County Chamber of Commerce held its annual Legislative Breakfast Friday to let other local political figures

as well as members of the community know the highlights of the past year and plans for the future.

Columbia County Board of Supervisors Chairman Art Baer, R-Hillsdale, Assemblymen Tim Gordon, I,D,WF-Bethlehem, Peter Lopez, R,C,I-Schoharie, and Marc Molinaro, R,C,I-Tivoli, were introduced by David Colby, Chamber president, and Michael Sullivan, Chamber chairman. State Sen. Steve Saland was also supposed to be speaking at the event but was unable to attend as he was in session finalizing the state budget.

The breakfast also brought out some notable guests, such as current Republican congressional candidate Assemblyman James Tedisco.

Tedisco, who has been in news recently for his too-close-to-call race with Democratic candidate Scott Murphy, said about the campaign: "We knew it was going to be close from the beginning, and we're still optimistic about the outcome. The most important thing now is that the election is completed. We need to make sure everyone who voted gets their vote counted."



Assemblyman Marc Molinaro, second from right, joined by fellow panelists Assemblymen Peter Lopez and Tim Gordon, background left and right, and Art Baer, chairman of the County Board of Supervisors, listen to a question posed to them during the annual Chamber of Commerce Legislative Breakfast Friday at Columbia-Greene Community College. (Robert Ragaini/Hudson-Catskill Newspapers)

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Tedisco gave no indication that just hours later he would announce that he will step down next week as minority leader while he waits for the election results. Until the results are final, Tedisco will continue to represent his upstate Assembly district, which includes parts of Schenectady and Saratoga counties.

As the attendees finished breakfast, Baer approached the podium to speak, starting off with a wry smile and the phrase, "It's been one heck of a year since I last spoke here."

It was at last year's breakfast that Baer ignited a firestorm of controversy when he announced the county's plans to move the Department of Social Services to the old Ockawamick School in Philmont.

Baer proceed to outline the work done over the last year, including the Baldwin Bell Green economic development study which looks at other counties similar in size to Columbia, both in the state of New York and out, learning from them in the hopes to better Columbia County. From this study, county officials created a series of strategic initiatives centering on focused agriculture, health care, sports and recreation, tourism and education.

Baer also touched on various ways the county and New York as a whole have been responding to the current economic crisis, such as issuing a hiring freeze on all county employees and initiating a program to help reduce overtime costs. The latter program, he assured the crowd, has been extremely successful, already saving the state more than \$100,000. On this same note, Baer stressed the importance of maintaining and revitalizing the current businesses of the county while at the same time bringing in new ones.

Lopez was the next to speak and was quick to assure the crowd that although he only represented a few towns in Columbia County, that didn't make its residents any less important to him. "My goal is to serve Columbia County fully ..." he said at the opening of his speech, "... to be a partner with you, the people who make the county a place to be proud of."

The assemblyman said he believes the clear issue for the upcoming year is the meltdown on Wall Street and what it will mean to the people of both the county and the state. According to Lopez, upward pressure on the budget is unavoidable, and the only way to combat this and many other economic problems is to focus on local businesses.

"The lack of attention and true acknowledgment of the importance of businesses is the core of dysfunction in New York," he said. "The people have to decide: Do we help businesses or do we make it more difficult for them with every vote?"

He went on to say that we need to more than just give lip service to helping businesses, we need to actually buckle down and do it. "If we wait for something to be handed to us, we're done," he said toward the end of his speech.

Lopez also brought up the issue of how many people are viewing the newly appointed stimulus funds in the wrong light. He said he believes they should be used to help reform the budget so we can better adapt to the current economy rather than just being something to tide us over until some mythical point in the future when the economy gets better.

“People are looking at the stimulus like it’s a pinata,” said Lopez, “you get your piece of candy and then go home. It is not intended to be a grab bag. We need to use our collective energies to turn this around ... the real danger is sliding through without reform.

“We have a job to do,” he finished, “how about rolling up our sleeves and doing it.”

Tim Gordon struck a humorous note with attendees when he stepped up to the podium to address the crowd, saying, “We need a hotel in Columbia County,” and then proceeding to walk directly back to his seat. Though the assemblyman did go back to the podium and expand on his ideas for the future, that first sentence really summed up much of what he said he believes the county really needs in order to prosper.

“People want to be here,” he said later. “We need to make places to stay for people who want to visit our county, but not buy property. Tourism and agriculture are huge industries for us now.” Though Gordon said we have a long way to go in this department, he was quick to add that over the years there have definitely been several positive steps toward commerce and growth in Columbia County.

Molinaro was the last to speak, as well as the most vehement toward the idea of reform. He started off by saying that he believes the current budget shines only a moderate amount of hope in the state of New York, and that if this is to change at all we need to have some true reformation.

“The problem is,” said the assemblyman, “that we are debating against a set of policies that, with all due respect, are an economic disaster.” Molinaro said he believes that this year we face the most difficult economic and fiscal challenges in at least two decades, and that we can’t just keep using the same gimmicks over and over while expecting different results.

“Unless we reform this,” he said, “we will see no changes.

Molinaro agreed with Lopez in saying that businesses in the state and the county alike need to pull together and start making decisions as a group and demanding change. He argued for the demand of reforms regardless of party background, ending by reiterating his main point that “we have to make sure we are not going down that same old path over and over again.”

After the speeches were finished there was time left over for a short question-and-answer session. One of the major issues brought up during this session was whether or not the assemblymen present supported the reform of the Rockefeller drug laws, to which the general consensus on this was that they did — but only to a certain extent.

Gordon said he believed “we need to give the judges the discretion over who can be treated and who needs to go into the joint.”

Molinaro chimed in his agreement, adding that there needs to be an open and honest dialogue on the justice system in order for these changes to occur properly, rather than just crammed into a budget.

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