



# “NEWS & VIEWS”

## Your Spring Newsletter From

# CHRIS HIGGINS

### ALBANY COUNTY LEGISLATOR

### 5TH DISTRICT

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*It is my pleasure to distribute my county newsletter to you. Throughout my term in office I like to use this newsletter as well as my website, [www.higginsforalbany.com](http://www.higginsforalbany.com) to keep in touch and share my perspective on what's happening in our county. I believe that an important aspect of public service is responding to constituent concerns and providing timely and relevant information. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please feel free to contact me.*

#### **Budget & Finances**

Last year's county budget was one of the most challenging dealt with in recent history. Faced with ever increasing payments for state unfunded mandates (there are nine mandated state programs we must pay for) and declining revenue from various sources, the county chose to raise taxes to balance its books. During budget negotiations I offered several proposals, including an actual amendment to the budget to help lower the proposed increase. Unfortunately the amendment was voted down and none of my suggestions were included in the final budget. Seeing yet another tax increase as unfair and believing we could have cut costs further, I chose to vote no, as I have done in the past, on the county budget.

I continue to believe we can save money by being more efficient. As sales tax revenue the county takes in increases, it is my hope that this year the county will be able to stay within the 2% property tax cap.

#### **Re-Invigorating Albany County's Human Rights Commission**

In February I introduced legislation that would update and enhance Albany County's Human Rights Law. The legislation provides greater protections to all individuals in the County by ensuring that the county complies with local, state, and federal anti-discrimination policies, and reinforces the Commission's authority to hear disputes referred to it. The law for the first time would also be extended to cover transgender persons.

The county must encourage programs designed to ensure that every individual has an equal opportunity to participate in an environment free from all forms of discrimination. Updating our county anti-discrimination policies as well as emphasizing the importance of this commission will show our renewed commitment to these important issues. The bill is being supported by the Empire State Pride Agenda and also the Capital Region New York Civil Liberties Union.



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### **Charter Review Commission**

Legislation to create a charter review commission to re-evaluate the county's charter and governing powers was recently passed. The commission is made up of non-legislators and charged with conducting hearings throughout the county. A final report of recommendations must be submitted to the legislature by the end of the year.

I have made clear through the committee process that I believe this commission must review the size of our legislative body, which is the largest in the state. In my opinion the County Legislature is too large (39 members) and needs to be significantly downsized. Hopefully, through its hearings the commission will be able to determine what a more appropriate size would be and provide the body with recommendations that will help bring our charter into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Phone Book Registry**

I've introduced legislation that would require a conspicuous notice on phone books so consumers can opt out of the delivery. Every yellow pages directory would be required to carry notices including opt out phone numbers and websites for consumers to use to decline such delivery. This common sense proposal will provide consumers with the ability to decline a service that, with the advent of the internet, is not necessarily needed anymore. In many instances these books are delivered to homes where no one lives and unnecessarily become a part of the waste stream and major nuisances in our neighborhoods.

### **Land Bank Fails**

Over the last year and a half myself and community advocates worked tirelessly to pass legislation I sponsored to create a land bank for Albany County. A land bank is a governmental or nonprofit entity that acquires, holds, and manages foreclosed or abandoned properties, allowing them to be returned to productive use in the community. In Albany, over 800 properties have been classified as vacant. The lengthy county foreclosure and auction process allows speculators to continue to circulate the properties that still have substantial value, each time diminishing some of the remaining worth of the structure. The end result is usually demolition that is administered by the city and reimbursed by

taxpayers throughout the County. In short, while local residents see the everyday economic, safety and livability impacts that vacancy and abandonment realizes, it is all county residents who end up paying the bill.

Unfortunately after a prolonged debate the bill failed on the floor with members agreeing to support another much more vague proposal put forth by the majority leader and chair to reform the auction process and create an "in-house" landbank. I remain committed to this issue and will continue to explore ways the county can work to address the vacant building crisis facing our city.

### **Animal Abuse Registry**

Albany County has become the second municipality in the state to enact an animal abuse registry. Strongly backed by the Humane Society, the law requires that anyone convicted of animal cruelty or abuse register with the Sheriff. The submitted information, including a picture is then transmitted to the Humane Society which posts the information on a newly created link on its website. Abusers will be registered for a minimum of 10 years.

In addition, anyone selling or giving an animal to another person in the county must now check the website prior to changing ownership. Failure to check will result in the possibility of being charged with a violation. The goal is to prevent people from becoming repeat offenders. By preventing people from acquiring animals in the first place, we hope to prevent future abuse.

### **Window & Roof Stabilization Fund**

I'm happy to report that one of my proposals was included in the budget to redirect \$250,000 for demolishing derelict buildings to a window and roof stabilization fund to help prevent weather damage that often speeds the deterioration of vacant buildings the county takes ownership of.

### **Albany County Rail Trail**

Work on the rail trail from Voorheesville to Albany continues after the county secured a federal grant with an anticipated completion date sometime in 2015. For more information please visit [www.albanycounty.com/railtrail/default.asp](http://www.albanycounty.com/railtrail/default.asp)



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