



“NEWS & VIEWS”

YOUR SPRING NEWSLETTER FROM. . .

CHRIS HIGGINS

**ALBANY COUNTY LEGISLATOR,
6TH DISTRICT**

**HUDSON/PARK, WASHINGTON PARK, PARK SOUTH,
CENTER SQUARE & THE MANSION NEIGHBORHOODS**

88 DOVE STREET

ALBANY, NY 12210

TELEPHONE: (518) 320-8580

EMAIL: CHRISTOPHER.HIGGINS@ALBANYCOUNTY.COM

It is my pleasure to distribute the second edition of my county newsletter to you. Over the next several years I intend to use this newsletter to keep in touch and share my perspective on what’s happening in our county and neighborhoods. I believe that an important aspect of public service is responding to constituent concerns and providing timely and relevant information. As such, if you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

County Funding For Gun Buy-Back

In August the county legislature unanimously passed a resolution I sponsored allocating \$10,000 towards a community organized gun buy-back program run by the Rev. Charles Muller. The money will be used to purchase gift cards to Colonie Center and Crossgates malls, which are in turn given to those who turn in guns through the program. The initiative has been so successful, that prior to county involvement over 60 guns had already been collected. By providing this funding, Rev. Muller will be able to expand this program countywide, which was originally just accepting guns from within the City of Albany. It is my hope that the program continues to be successful and that over the next year we see a decrease in shootings and gun violence here in Albany.

County Acquisition of Canadian Pacific Rail Land For Proposed Rail Trail

After nearly a decade of discussion, Albany county recently announced that it would acquire the 9.3 mile Canadian Pacific rail corridor between Voorheesville and Albany. The sale is

being underwritten with grants from the State and Scenic Hudson and is contingent on an environmental assessment that must be undertaken to see if any of the property is contaminated. Once acquired, work will begin to convert the line into a multi-use recreational trail for biking, hiking and running. The county has also recently applied for transportation enhancement funding to develop the Patroon Creek Greenway, a corridor stretching from 6 Mile Waterworks to Tivoli Park.

Several counties throughout New York are also actively involved in creating environmentally friendly rail trails for leisure use. As Albany County does not have a public park system in place for its residents, I view this county acquisition as a positive development towards providing residents with additional options when it comes to enjoying outdoor activities at county facilities.

Plastic Bag Recycling Law

In May the county legislature passed a local law I sponsored that requires all big box stores

10,000 square feet or larger located in Albany County to establish in-store recycling programs so that shoppers may recycle their used plastic bags. Currently, the city and some towns do not accept these bags for recycling. The law also has an educational component that requires the county department of consumer affairs to undertake a public awareness campaign so that people and businesses alike are aware of the benefits of recycling plastic bags and of proper recycling methods. Stores that do not comply with the law will be subject to a range of fines starting at \$500.00. Similar laws have already been adopted in other counties throughout the state including Suffolk, Westchester and New York City in an attempt to curb the proliferation of these environmentally unfriendly bags.

Albany County Social Host Law

In August, the county legislature unanimously passed a bill I sponsored commonly referred to as the "Social Host" law. The legislation closes a loophole in state law and would hold property owners criminally liable when they *knowingly* allow people under the age of 21 to consume alcohol on their property. The genesis for this law originates out of a high school graduation party where the parents allowed underage teens to drink and then failed to take the keys away from them so they couldn't drive home. Unfortunately, one student chose to leave drunk and got into an accident, killing another teen in the car.

Prior to passage at the county level several municipalities, including Cohoes and Green Island had already enacted their own local laws closing this loophole. By passing this law at the county level, law enforcement will now have a uniform, countywide standard to help address this issue.

Albany County Housing Trust Fund

In my opinion, one of the best programs the county has developed over the last two years is an affordable housing trust fund. Under the program, county funding is allocated to various affordable housing projects following approval from a screening committee review of submissions from a mix of non-profit and municipal housing agencies. This year, \$325,000

was approved by the legislature for four different rehabilitation projects in the county. I am happy to report that a grant of \$75,000 was awarded to Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless to construct ten new units of permanent supportive housing on Sheridan Avenue in Albany. I look forward to continuing this worthwhile program in 2009 as the county moves into the budget process for next year.

Canadian Drug Availability

One of the most pressing issues facing Americans today is the high cost of prescription drug coverage. In an effort to relieve some of the pain of high prescription costs several counties in New York have begun offering a lower-cost Canadian drug option as part of their employee/retiree prescription drug benefit plans. In Schenectady county, officials estimate that savings through their program are now approximately \$100,000 a month, while Rensselaer county reported savings of \$270,000 in 2007 based on 2,676 prescriptions filled through the option. Based on research, it has been estimated Albany could anticipate yearly savings of up to \$687,000 if only 10% of covered beneficiaries participated in the Canadian drug option, and more than \$2 million if 30% of those beneficiaries ordered so-called maintenance medications from Canada.

Based on this research in August the county legislature requested the county executive to incorporate this lower cost Canadian drug option into the County's prescription drug benefit plan for employees, retirees and their dependents when the current plan expires at the end of the year. The Department of Human Resources has also been charged with devising a program to offer employees and retirees of the county incentives such as zero co-pays, cash awards or subsidies for membership in health clubs to encourage participation in this option.