

COMMENTARY

Long Island's political future needs a suburban state Senate caucus



Kyle
STROBER

How can voter rich Long Island maintain its political influence in a New York State Senate chamber that will have an overwhelming number of New York City legislators next year? It will be a challenge the Senate's new Democratic leadership will need to master or their majority will be at risk in the next election cycle.

Elected, in part, as a response to President Trump's political agenda, a new class of progressive New York State lawmakers are expected to make good on campaign pledges made to an activated and engaged liberal base. Their Democratic colleagues in the Assembly will follow suit and, together, they have the power to redraw the political landscape, starting with their own five boroughs. But if past is prologue, the Senate Democratic conference will need to proceed thoughtfully because when their party held the majority eight years ago they approved legislation viewed by many Long Islanders as openly hostile acts, such as the MTA Payroll Tax. That strategy ultimately cost Democratic Long Island Senators Craig Johnson and Brian Foley their seats and the Democrats their Albany majority in that chamber.

What was demonstrated then, and remains a political fact of life is that no political party can afford to alienate the Long Island voter, or the rapidly growing suburbs that are spreading north of Westchester and into the Hudson Valley. Savvy statewide candidates have long known that simple first rule of politics: you have to know how to count which means Long Island can't be ignored.

In recognition of Long Island's wariness over New York City's political agenda, the emerging State Senate delegation from Long Island should move to create a "suburban state senate caucus" that would act as a potent counterbalance to the considerable influence of Gotham's delegation.

Such a conference could be chaired by Senator Todd Kaminsky of Long Beach, who will become Long Island's "go to" lawmaker in a democratically controlled chamber. His colleagues would include Long Island senators, Anna Kaplan, John Brooks, Monica Martinez, Jim Gaughran, Kevin Thomas, as well as suburban senators in the Hudson Valley region including Mayer, Carucci, Harckham, and Skoufis. To ensure a broad geographic reach include Buffalo's Senator Ted Kennedy.

If it were comprised of just Democrats it would form a block of ten suburban based votes, a voting block large enough in a 40 member majority to effectively lobby leadership to ensure the suburbs receive its fair share of state aid on issues ranging from transportation to sewers. If the suburban conference works across partisan lines the remaining three Long Island Republican State Senators would create a unified voting block whose concerns and regional agenda must be addressed.

These types of caucuses are not unique as evidenced by the hundreds that exist within the U.S. House of Representatives with names and missions that range from the Candy Caucus to the Problem Solvers Caucus, a bipartisan group whose Vice Chair, Rep. Tom Suozzi, will now find himself with plenty of problems to solve as a member of the new majority.

For Long Island, a state senate caucus specifically tailored to address the regional concerns of the suburbs would reveal a political coming of age that our issues are not ancillary to those of neighboring New York City and one party rule in Albany doesn't mean we are marching in lock-step to another region's dominance. Typically, this caucus could ensure Long Island receives its fair share of school aid, make certain the Long Island Railroad and our region's infrastructure gets its equal share of state funding and most importantly, make the 2 percent property tax cap, possibly one of Gov. Cuomo's single greatest accomplishment for Long Island taxpayers, a permanent mandate.

There is recognition on both sides of the political aisle that New York State has just entered new and uncharted territory. A state senate suburban caucus will go a long way in establishing clear and unequivocal public policy for what an important and dynamic part of the state will insist upon if elected officials expect our vote next election day.

Kyle Strober is executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island

Competition and transparency are key to reducing health care costs

By **TJ MODZELEWSKI**

Picture a scene that is all too familiar for most health care consumers: Your doctor says you need some sort of scan such as an MRI or CT scan. The doctor writes a prescription, you go home, follow-up with the place the doctor told you to call and book the appointment, knowing you'll inevitably have a hefty out-of-pocket cost. Now picture a service that could help you book the appointment at a high quality imaging center at a convenient time and location for you while costing 30 – 70 percent less than the option you were given originally.

The scenario isn't health care fiction. It exists today and reflects a pathway to significantly lowering the cost of healing America. This competitive business model was created by US Imaging Network and is currently being used by the insurance company Humana for its Commercial and Medicare members, but it needs to be embraced as a national model if we expect to address the crushing burden of insurance premiums and ever growing patient out-of-pocket costs that literally distort our national economy.

Taken as an isolated "snapshot," digital imaging is one of the fastest growing segments in total health care spending in the U.S. out of the nation's total health care cost of \$3.5 trillion. That makes it a perfect target for identifying ways to lower costs, particularly when there are so many options for where to have a scan performed but they come with wildly different prices and fees.

Currently, if you visit your family physician and she says you need a scan, chances are she'll direct you to the imaging center that is part of your nearby hospital. But if you are able to go to a free standing imaging center, you'll pay less because hospital charges range from roughly 70–200 percent higher on a per-unit basis than when care

takes place in a free standing center. So why is directing to free standing centers the exception not the default?

One means of changing the landscape of current health care costs is the use of online comparison tools that bring transparency to the consumer seeking to look up the cost of services at different locations in advance. Unfortunately, studies show that most of us don't utilize these resources before scheduling a service. When a doctor tells us a scan is needed, we are inclined to make it happen quickly and rely heavily on our doctor's recommendation of location, for that instruction infers a medical problem and the deliberate decision making process we reserve for other major purchasing decisions is often suspended.

In the US Imaging business model, health advocates make a proactive calls to inform a patient of their network facility options, provide cost transparency and assist in scheduling appointments at lower cost, high quality sites of service. It's part of a growing movement toward concierge services in health care.

The current national business model for health care is unsustainable. As an ever larger portion of the population ages, requiring more care such as diagnostic services, the economic fissures represented by existing practices will widen into a gaping abyss that will force changes in how, who, and why we pay for care. The US Imaging model is just part of the solution. Consumer education that is broadened through the widespread acceptance of comparison tools is key. And physicians need to be an essential part of the partnership in reducing costs by educating their patients about the choices available to lower the cost of getting better.

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