

## Keep tabs on the money, N.Y.

By **JOSÉ SERRANO**

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During the Senate leadership battle, Albany has been flooded with rhetoric on reform and transparency. But the rhetoric is empty; it is cast in terms of personality, at the expense of real policy.

The battle could not have come at a more inopportune moment, just as New York is tackling the economic crisis with a mix of homegrown belt-tightening and sizeable federal support. Rather than lose focus, we must do everything we can to stay energized.

This week, I introduced legislation (S5879) in the Senate to make New York the most reliable recipient of federal stimulus funds in the country. My Assembly colleague Michael Gianaris, D-Queens, introduced the same bill in that chamber (A8941).

The bill would create an independent ombudsman's office to help disburse and track the money.

Since latching onto this issue earlier, we have made clear our strong support for Gov. David Paterson. He has shown great leadership in his advocacy for both fiscal responsibility and federal stimulus.

With these bills, we hope to build upon that leadership. The ombudsman's office will have the power to subpoena, to conduct investigations, and to challenge allocations that do not meet exacting standards. More broadly, the ombudsman will establish performance metrics to better inform the decision-making process and foster greater public engagement.

New York expects to receive nearly \$27 billion in stimulus money, and a host of very public -- and very laudable -- funding decisions have already been made. But we still need comprehensive and coordinated tracking, to ensure that every dollar is accounted for.

We must "drill down" the data to its most fundamental parts: How many and what kind of jobs are being created? Who are the contractors and sub-contractors?

Is the project running on schedule and on budget? All of this data must be public, and, just as important, publicly accessible.

Existing efforts to track the money are intensive, but highly fragmented. President Barack Obama, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Paterson all have launched Web sites.

The state comptroller's Open Book New York, an online "road map" to follow tax dollars, is also set to have a stimulus component. There appears little effort to connect the data across systems, nor share information technology and expertise.

The buck must stop with a single person, one who performs his or her duties with dedicated time and resources, and a real freedom from politics. The ombudsman will be selected by an independent nominating commission, and will serve one fixed term ending in January 2013, unless extended by the Legislature.

Annual reports will be released detailing the work of each state agency that receives stimulus funds. In this way, the ombudsman's office will function as a single clearinghouse, but at the same time leverage the oversight powers of legislative committees, government officials, journalists and regular citizens.

In fact, one of the leading voices on accountability has been the public. The New York State Stimulus Oversight Working Group, an ideologically diverse body of organizations, came together earlier this year to draft a list of common principles, and has played a key advocacy role ever since.

There is more at stake here than just the original allotment of \$27 billion. It's quite possible the federal government will approve future stimulus funding. Or perhaps money rejected by other state governments will also become available. Now is the time to position New York as the state that inspires the most confidence, and spends its money most effectively.

New York was pivotal to the nation's economic recovery efforts during the Great Depression. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had served in Albany, and both his successor, Gov. Herbert Lehman, and New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia were champions of the New Deal. The investments made during their tenures live on to this day.

Solidifying oversight during the current crisis will guarantee that we uphold this tradition. To be sure, the federal stimulus package is massive in size and daunting in scope. But it remains an act of proactive governance -- not of faith -- and we have an obligation to the taxpayer to keep an eye on every last dollar.

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