



Regional councils: Was it the projects or the process?

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Articles in the Journal News on Feb. 8th and 9th called attention to the fact that compared to other regions upstate and on Long Island, our region did not fare as well. Our regional council's top priority projects received only \$4 million (of \$10.5 million requested) which was allotted to New York Medical College for a Biotech Incubator Center for Research. The other two priority projects - a Cloud Computing Center at Marist College and an Autism Center in Sullivan County - went unfunded. Members of the council are trying to figure out what went wrong. We're wondering, was the process flawed to begin with? And with economic growth in Westchester a top priority, what can we do about it?

Quick recap: Appointed by Gov. Cuomo in the spring, 2011, regional councils were created to stimulate regional economic development and create jobs. The idea was to empower each region to create plans and set priorities, to attract growth and create jobs. For their efforts, the regions would be rewarded: a billion dollars across the board would be made available by NYS. This was touted as a move away from top-down management to a community-based approach, and was all part of the administration's "New York is Open for Business" campaign. In Dec., when the awards were announced, the governor said, "For the first time, we are putting the power of the state government behind the innovation of our people, giving them the tools to rebuild our economy."

It didn't quite turn out that way, at least not for Westchester. First: the billion dollars that was to be made available turned out to be \$785 million, and was not "new money" for economic development but rather "repurposed" funds from those allotted to various state agencies. As it turned out, the award to Westchester was made in proportion to available agency funding, rather than what might have been best for our region's future. This might explain why Yonkers received \$29 million for a housing project, but only \$4 million was allotted to New York Medical College for their biotech project. Of the 315 projects our regional council submitted, 61 were funded, and most of the dollars were for housing.

We also learned that while the regional councils were working on their submissions, companies seeking NYS incentive dollars were kept in limbo for months, waiting for the outcome of the regional council process - not exactly a good indication that NYS is now "business-friendly." Companies need to know immediately what government can offer in the way of incentives. But one good thing came out of the entire process, and that was the consolidated application form for one-step funding from various state agencies; it will save applicants time and effort, and cut the red tape.

Now, the regional councils are reconvening for Part Two. Hopefully, the outcome will be a better one for Westchester. We hope the state will fund projects based on their regional economic development impact, rather than allocating funds based on the agency from which the dollars were originally sourced from. Together, we all need to reinforce the idea that Westchester is planning for tomorrow. One thing is certain: we cannot rely only on the work of our regional council and the good graces of

Albany. The private sector is going to have to drive the process. And here in Westchester, we have the perfect tool to do that: The Blueprint for Westchester, a new campaign to revitalize Westchester's economy. The Blueprint was spearheaded by the Westchester County Association in May, 2011, and has attracted a coalition of business, real estate, academia, and urban communities. It includes private-sector innovation and financing, as well as collaboration with county government to drive economic development here. In the best of all possible worlds, all three - our regional council, government, and the Blueprint - will bring home the bacon. Meanwhile, we have our work cut out for us.

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