

Cuomo: 'I came to listen'

By DAN JANISON
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More than 40 Staten Islanders stood last night to confront and plead with Gov. Mario M. Cuomo in a marathon four-hour public forum on the state budget for the fiscal year beginning next April 1.

At its early-evening peak, the forum — one of a series planned weeks ago to precede Cuomo's "state of the state" address Jan. 9 — drew 350 to the Williamson Theater at the College of Staten Island, Sunnyside.

Cuomo, without using the exact phrase, repeated a basic theme sounded before audiences statewide since he took office nearly two years ago — the budget as a "book of hard choices."

Asked, for instance, about a state subsidy for prescription drugs for senior citizens, he asked back whether all the elderly should be eligible. He gave similar responses about city university tuition and, while making supportive remarks about tax cuts, pushed those who demanded them about what services to forego rather than fund.

Cuomo told one speaker dur-

ing the forum, which lasted two hours longer than scheduled, "I came to listen to you."

The last of the speakers, Frances Dory of the New York City Self-Help Clearinghouse, completed her statement on state duplication of private services at 11:29 p.m.

But Cuomo did not escape Staten Island without some promises, if veiled.

Luke Nasta, executive director of the Camelot drug abuse program, told the governor that recent budget cuts had forced a 50-percent reduction in Camelot's staff. Nasta suggested the state "tax the hell out of 'head shops,'" which sell equipment for drug abuse, to help fund drug abuse programs.

"I like that," the governor said. "I think we'll use that one and claim it as our idea."

"We've discussed the whole constitutionality of banning the head shops," the governor continued, adding that it never occurred to state officials to tax the shops.

"I think you made a real con-

tribution ... I'll ask you to speak to (state substance abuse service chief) Julio Martinez here, because you certainly impressed me," Cuomo told Nasta.

Cuomo also indicated support for \$250,000 to further study the ill effects of air pollution on Staten Islanders. The issue was raised by Donna Gerstel, a College of Staten Island researcher who earlier this year presented what is believed to be a milestone report on the problem.

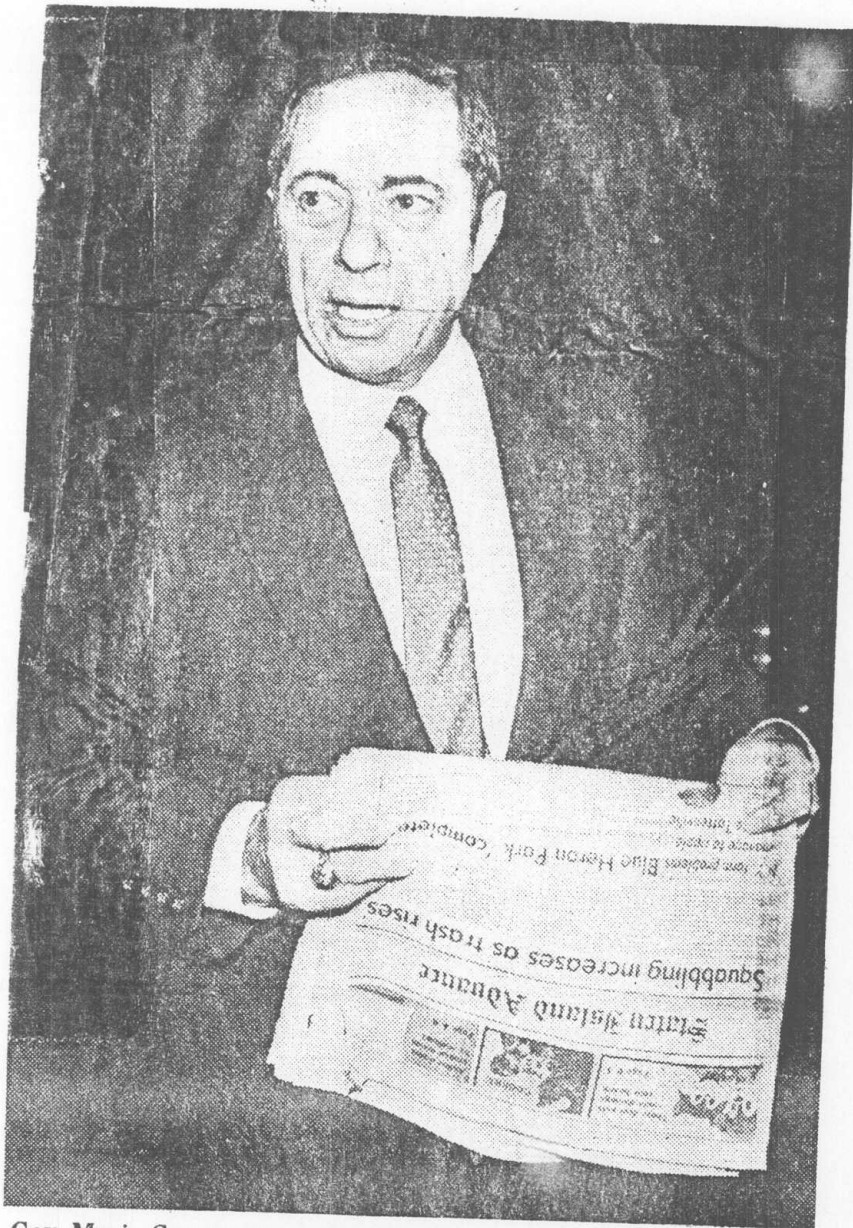
"That doesn't sound like a lot," Cuomo said after Ms. Gerstel told him how much the next step in the CSI research would cost. To Environmental Commissioner Henry Williams, seated in the front row of the auditorium, Cuomo said, "Look into it, because you look soft to me on that."

At another point, Cuomo said he plans to continue dialogue with Gov. Thomas Kean of New Jersey, noting that while New Yorkers suffer the effects of such facilities as chemical plants in New Jersey, the shores of the latter state receive untreated sewage dumped in area waterways from city outfalls.

"I can't frankly tell you solutions are a short way off and all the pollution will go away if you wait a little while longer," he said, after a statement linking acid rain and the need for resource recovery which "is still a long way off." Better monitoring of air pollution and restoration of cuts in inspectors positions were advocated by a few speakers.

Two-and-a-half-minute time constraints went out the window as the forum progressed, with both the moderator, Borough President Ralph Lamberti, and Cuomo seeming to make only the most minimal effort to limit comment.

Page 1 of 7



Gov. Mario Cuomo enters the College of Staten Island for his public forum with an Advance in hand.

S.I. Advance Photo by Irving Silverstein.

One dialogue, with Anthony Von Myers, president of the CSI student union, lasted nearly 20 minutes, ending with Cuomo refusing to predict whether tuition at public universities will rise next year. Students stood in a group to display large oak-tag signs to get their message across.

Like several other speakers, they also urged budget money for a consolidated campus, with Von Myers noting CSI has less space per student than any other city university branch.

Another lengthy exchange, proving less friendly, took place between the governor and Island businesswoman Margaret Sklenar. She spoke in her capacity as both an official of the Island Chamber of Commerce opposing current utility surcharges tied to mass transit and representing tavern owners opposed to hiking the drinking age to 21, for which Cuomo vowed to "press hard."

Part of the exchange had Mrs. Sklenar remarking about state giveaways to some. "Who?" Cuomo challenged.

"A lot of people who get state money for different purposes," she said.

"Who?" he pressed. "That's too easy."

She tried to provide an example. "...People who go to school just because there's money ... Don't ask me questions because I'm not educated in that."

They also jostled over tax cheating and whether those in the liquor industry are unfairly blamed for deaths on the roads.

At times, Cuomo used a cadre of high-level commissioners and top aides to answer questions or make referrals to comments

Page 2 of 7

from Staten Islanders that mostly involved education, appeals for the handicapped and even personal problems.

Cuomo told George Bonaragleo, leader of a Civil Service Employees Union local at the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) in Willowbrook, that he does not believe "the best thing we can do with this land is turn it over for commercial exploitation." Studies are underway and due back soon.

That acreage came up many times during the long evening. One of the final speakers, Ellen O'Flaherty Pratt who leads the Protectors of the Pine Oak Woods — suing the state over its cutting into woodland for housing for the retarded — stated, "It's an awful snarl between competing interests."

"I ask everyone involved to please talk to each other and see if there is not some way urgent interests of the mentally retarded and (the Greenbelt are resolved) so no one loses," she said.

Cuomo indicated he would look into the situation more personally.

Tyrone Daniels, also an SIDC union leader, complained that he received no response to a paper submitted months ago to administration officials outlining alternatives to Cuomo's stated intention of phasing out the facility.

No less than four times at the forum, as he has in news conferences in the past week, Cuomo criticized tax and spending policies of President Reagan, twice zeroing in on a U.S. Treasury Department proposal that would end local and state writeoffs from federal taxes.

"We're different from the federal government which has a money machine and spent \$210 billion more than they made," he said in a line very familiar to those who follow his public speeches.

Cuomo generally was received warmly. Representing Councilman Jerome X. O'Donovan, John Russell said "I hope you become president in 1988."

"I just want to be a judge like (Island appellate justice) Vito Titone," Cuomo said.

When another speaker suggested the same, he said "Some people will say anything just to get some money."

Still other speakers expressed personal plights. Sophie Levinson said she made a mistake by retiring early from state cutting state program and sought to go back to work. Cuomo assigned an aide to try to help.

Wheelchair-bound John Brennan, 40, of Old Town, disabled by a neurological disorder, delivered an explicit budget appeal on behalf of the Center for Independent Living in Seaview Hospital, where he works as a peer counselor to help others with similar conditions learn how to control their own lives.

Edith Reid appealed for funding to keep mental institutions from turning away patients, relating what she insisted was a true narrative of family members afflicted with schizophrenia who were dangerous to themselves and others.

Education was a key topic, perhaps drawing the greatest number of comments ranging from computers to adolescent pregnancy education programs, textbook aid and tuition tax breaks. Representatives of parents associations from private and public schools; Jacques Pessah of the Community School Board and several others appealed for more state aid.

Cuomo said there were laws restricting help for the city, such as those which guarantee at least the same level of aid as the previous year to all school districts, even those in wealthier areas upstate with declining school populations.

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Further, he said he could not keep Mayor Edward Koch from using budget money for purposes other than education, given the morass of needs. Still, Cuomo said he expects to continue pressing for increased school aid in the coming executive budget proposal due out in February.

On the fact that the Fresh Kills landfill will soon become the city's only dump, an issue raised by Sam Sayegh of radio station WSIA, Cuomo said the state could "help" and "encourage" resource recovery but would not step in directly because that would usurp the power of localities. The city garbage problem, he said, is not the problem of Erie or Utica or any other area of the state, and vice-versa.

"This is an obligation of the city of New York," he said. "It's kind of silly if all the local governments had to do was stalemate ... then Albany would run everything."

Leafleteers were also present at the forum,

appealing to be read if not heard. Cuomo reaffirmed his support for the proposed Navy

erature and was confronted by Mike Tormey, a District 1199 delegate and chairman of the Staten Island Council for Peace and Justice.

Protection for the victims of toxic poisoning was advocated in leaflets from the Toxic Victims Access to Justice Campaign. An anti-abortion group also gave out leaflets.

Reflecting the diverse interests were the married couple Al and Jane Thompson. They spoke back to back, she urging an end to abortion and he in favor of the state regulating sale of emergency alarms, on behalf of a statewide trade group.

Other speakers supporting a wide swath of programs included:

Lillian Prado and Edmund Murphy, manager and chairman of Community Board 2; Melinda Davie for psychiatric patients; Former Advance Woman of Achievement Carole Lazorisak, who spoke in sign language interpreted orally by a daughter, supporting a program for the deaf at LaGuardia College in Queens; La Litha Devi, for a Manhattan vocational program for alcoholics.

Also, Earleen Bethel spoke on behalf of youth programs based on "self-help", particularly in Mariners Harbor where some children have been found to use the dangerous drug angel dust. Eddie Bethel for community block development grants for the Area Policy Board.

Still others were: Christine Flynn, who confronted Cuomo about mandating programs the state cannot monetarily support; Carmine Iasue; Kathleen Harahoe; George Lee; Michael Hardy, chief executive officer of the Snug Harbor Cultural Center; senior citizen Sam Ferrera; James Aiello for the local real estate industry; Terry Troia on behalf of social programs, with whom Cuomo discussed his stand on abortion; Betty Jean Fleming; Theresa Mathiasen; Evelyn Arbeeney, advising that the city get a "fair share" of education revenue from Off-Track Betting receipts; Anthony Staliani; Barbara Wallach; Joe Holzka Jr.; Mary Lee Gladstone, executive director of the Island's Council on the Arts; Lathrope Voorspuy on behalf of Thomas Hamilton.

Other approached the governor as he moved through a smaller, quieted crowd shaking hands at the forum's finish. For example, Phyllis Cirillo told Cuomo about the Island's animal care crisis and advocated fund-

Page 4 of 7

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Gov. Cuomo speaks to the crowd of 350 in the Williamson Theater of the College of Staten Island.



Carol Lazarisak uses sign language to make her appeal supporting a program for the deaf at LaGuardia College in Queens, as her daughter, Dawn, reads the statement.



Earleen Bethel asks for youth programs based on "self-help."

Page 5
of 7



... with his director of operations, Harold Dulles



Tyrone Daniels, employee of the Staten Island Developmental Center and local president of the Civil Service Employees Association, asks why he received no response to a paper outlining alternatives to the governor's plan to phase out the facility.



Businesswoman Margaret Sklenar, representing both Staten Island tavern owners and the Chamber of Commerce, tells the governor the groups opposed raising the drinking age to 21 and opposed current utility charges tied to mass transit.

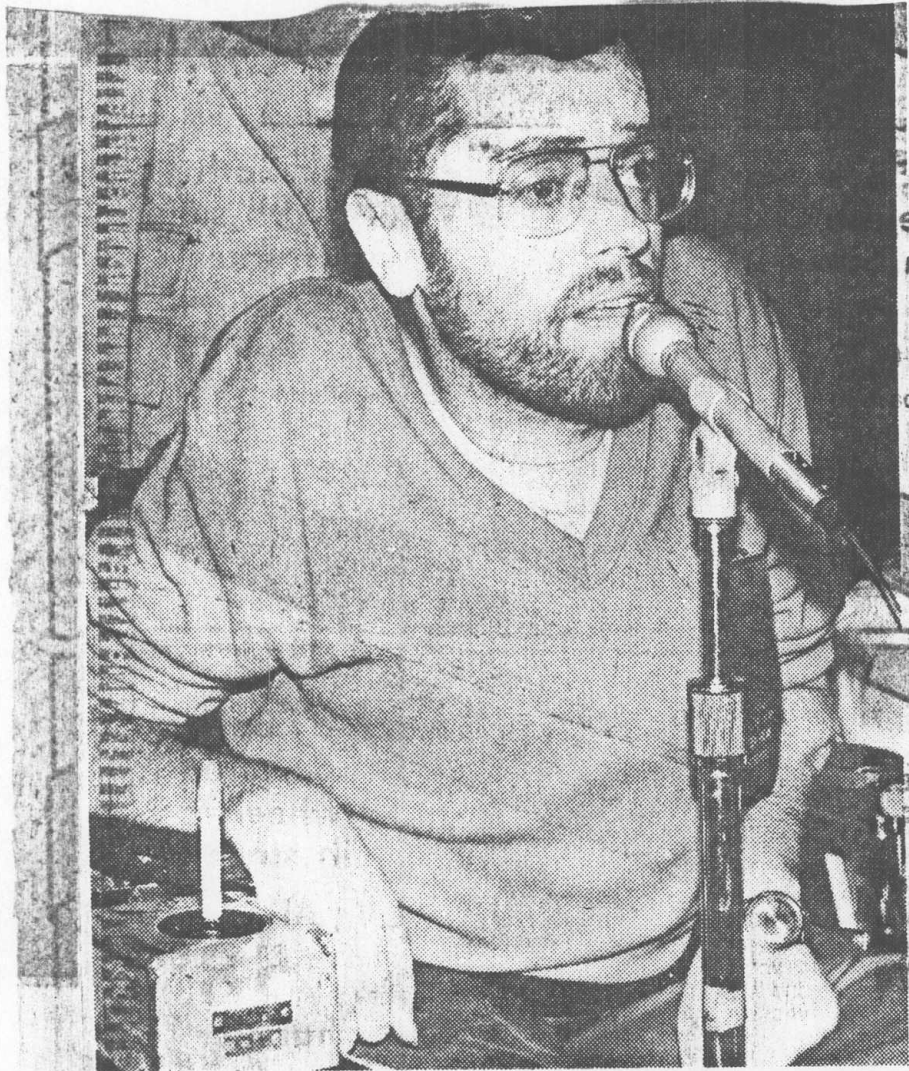
Page 6
of
7



Lalitha Devi, Employment Program for Recovered Alcoholics, speaks on behalf of the Manhattan vocational program.



Al J. Thompson, representing the state Burglar and Fire Alarm Association, pushes for regulation of the sale of emergency alarms.



Wheelchair-bound John Brennan delivers an appeal on behalf of the Center for Independent Living in Seaview Hospital, where he is employed as a peer counselor.

Page 7
of
17