

## FINAL WORD ↔ BY TIM ROWLAND

# Politicians Doing Un-Politician Things

**T**his year, Essex County — New York’s second largest county by size but seventh smallest by population — received \$7 million in funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). That’s more than \$200 for every man, woman, and moose in this wild and mountainous vacation paradise.

This is in addition to the personal stimulus checks the federal government handed out to people who may or may not have been damaged by the pandemic, as well as the hundreds of thousands of dollars the 37,000 people of Essex County are privy to courtesy of the ongoing opioid settlements, and the millions in COVID rescue funds that have been awarded to small towns, school districts, and hospitals nationwide.

Grant money for specific public projects has been flowing like wine, and every other day it seems the county’s representatives in Washington are calling to remind residents that millions of dollars in earmarks are once again out there for the taking.

When the pandemic hit with full force in the spring of 2020, people stopped going to stores. That was of little consequence to Essex County, which does not have any stores. OK, a few. But what New York did have was a shiny new tax on internet sales, and the local population — which ordinarily would have traveled to shop and generate sales tax revenue in more cosmopolitan jurisdictions like Plattsburgh, Glens Falls, and across the Vermont border in Burlington — was forced to shop and pay taxes at home.

About this time, people who were locked down in the cities realized the fresh breezes and wide-open spaces of the Adirondack Mountains greatly reduced the chances of

becoming infected with COVID-19. They swarmed the region and filled thousands of houses and rooms that locals rent out to help pay their exorbitant school and property taxes.

These short-term rentals are taxed and — *what do you know* — at the height of the summer COVID surge, a long-planned increase to the Essex County room tax kicked in, showering even more cash on the region. Nonetheless, those who visited loved being here, and many decided to stay or at least buy a second home. Because of this, the county’s mortgage and recording tax revenue became a gusher.

That’s not all the bonanza that has hit county coffers, but you get the idea.

The 18-member board of supervisors leans heavily Republican, the way “Republican” used to be understood. They have unfailingly kind things to say about Rep. Elise Stefanik, whose congressional district includes the county, but they are not cut from her prickly, partisan cloth. There also are a fair smattering of Democrats on the board, but it’s hard to tell the parties apart. They seemingly share genuine friendships and don’t snipe — or tweet.

All are fiscally conservative, and as might be surmised, a bit nonplussed at the current state of financial affairs. They are like vegans at Golden Corral. They took their \$7 million in ARPA money and, after spending on just about everything they figured was worth spending on, discovered they had about \$6 million left.

They identified a social problem — lack of adequate childcare — and addressed it not with state-owned daycare centers, but with seed money to help private providers establish their businesses. Somewhere across Lake Champlain, Bernie Sanders slapped his forehead.

Some of the supervisors would like to spend a little of the remaining money — not millions, but a little bit — to nudge private construction companies to build more affordable housing. This would be intended to counterbalance state policies that have increased the local tax burden, which makes homes less affordable, which drives people out of the region, which increases the tax burden even more on those who are left.

Albany, the capital not just of New York but of “Go Big or Go Home” policymaking, was itself bailed out by the pandemic that has killed a million Americans. Six months into it, the state’s budget deficit was approaching \$15 billion. Today, thanks



in part to federal stimulus funding, analysts are predicting years of surpluses. We’ll see about that.

Viewed against the massive transfer of wealth from the federal government to states, Essex County’s share is but a drop within a drop. Still, there seems to be a small degree of irritation among the county supervisors that their annual woe-begone song about how there’s never any money has been taken out of play.

Credit them for acting the way conservatives used to act and spending the way conservatives used to spend — which is to say in small, targeted amounts. And if you ask them if they want another round of stimulus, their response would very likely mimic Robert Redford’s in *The Sting* when offered his share of the loot: “Nah. I’d only blow it.”

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