

## **The Early Bird by Dan Jacoby**

Now that George Pataki has announced he will not seek a fourth term as Governor of New York (probably because he'd lose), the question of his tenure becomes moot. Instead, there are two issues where anyone wishing to be the next Governor can make tremendous headway with the voters. Both issues are available to anyone, since they cross party lines. And both issues will appeal to voters all over the state.

The first issue is local control of local budgets and taxes. Currently, any tax changes local governments want to make must be approved in Albany. That's just plain crazy. Here in New York City we were treated to a shining example of just how crazy that rule is. In 2002, newly elected Mayor Bloomberg had a \$5 billion deficit to cover. His early attempts to raise a variety of taxes by small increments were vetoed by Governor Pataki, and he ended up being forced into an 18% property tax increase.

The rule assumes that city and town councils are incapable of understanding their own local budget processes, but that legislators in Albany do. If anyone can explain that, I'd nominate that person for a Nobel prize.

The second issue is the ban on running a surplus. During the boom of the Clinton years, New York City was one of the largest beneficiaries, especially with the tremendous revenues being generated from Wall Street. If we had been allowed to run a surplus during those years and create a "rainy day" account, we wouldn't have had to raise taxes or cut services when the boom went bust.

Instead, six fire stations were closed down, and now response times have increased, endangering people's lives.

The gubernatorial candidate who captures the voters' hearts and minds will be the first who says, "We're just too busy in Albany dealing with our own tax and budget problems to deal with your local problems. I'm going to give you control of your own local issues. I'm also going to push for an amendment to the state constitution that allows you to put some money aside when you can, so that you can continue to function smoothly when times are tough."

November 7, 2006 is still over 15 months away, but this issue has enough legs to run for that long. The other issue, reforming the way things are done (and often not done) in Albany, is a lot murkier and a lot more difficult to explain in a sound bite. This issue is clear, obvious, and would grab bipartisan support. And it's not too early to take command, when the risks are so minimal and the benefits are so massive.

Right now, Democrat Eliot Spitzer is the only declared major candidate. This gives him a golden opportunity to stake his claim with a pre-emptive announcement. If he passes it up, and one of the Republican candidates steals this issue, it could make an enormous difference on election day.

It could make all the difference.