

Capitol Watch: 9 legislative updates you may have missed over the long weekend

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ITHACA, N.Y. — National political headlines were dominated by calls for impeachment, lost hopes of infrastructure week and subpoena filings last week, but lawmakers in Albany and Washington took on a range of issues before leaving town for a weeklong recess. The House passed a major bipartisan plan to help Americans save for retirement, a disaster relief bill stalled, New York lawmakers made moves to reign in President Trump, and Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed a bill officially blocking the Romulus trash incinerator.

Senate Passes Anti-Robocall Bill

The U.S. Senate passed a bill cosponsored by Sen. Chuck Schumer aimed at cracking down on robocall scams. (<https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/ny-senate-bill-schumer-plague-robocalls-20190523-oqyrufw35zbwfmtehny7rlf7na-story.html>) The legislation would give federal authorities the ability to charge those trying to scam consumers over the phone. The bill passed the Senate (https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm?congress=116&session=1&vote=00127) in a nearly unanimous 97-1 vote.

New Marijuana Legislation Introduced

State legislators unveiled a revised bill to legalize and regulate recreational marijuana (<https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/Lawmakers-tweak-recreational-marijuana-proposal-13895009.php>) last week. Legalization was originally part of budget negotiations in April, and the new bills are meant to mirror the governor's proposal.

Sen. Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan) (<https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2019/s1527>) and Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes (D-Buffalo) introduced the legislation in each chamber. The bill would create a central state office to oversee all cannabis-related operations in the state, including industrial hemp, recreational marijuana and medicinal marijuana, and would expunge criminal records for prior marijuana convictions stemming from actions that would no longer be criminal. Assemblywoman Lifton has signed on as a cosponsor of the new assembly bill (<https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2019/a1617/amendment/a>).

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Federal Retirement Savings Bill Passed

The House passed the SECURE Act (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1994>) this week, a bill that changes 401(k) regulations with the goal of helping Americans save for retirement (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-does-the-house-retirement-bill-mean-for-you-11558645040>). The bipartisan bill raises the age when 401(k) holders are required to begin withdrawing funds from 70 1/2 to 72, recognizing that Americans are living and working longer than in years past. It also makes it easier for small businesses to band together to provide retirement savings accounts and expands access to retirement plans for part-time employees who work at least 500 hours per year.

The legislature is expected to pass the Senate soon, but a provision that would insulate employers (<https://theintercept.com/2019/05/22/secure-act-retirement-accounts/>) who include annuities in retirement packages from lawsuits has garnered some controversy. Annuities are a way of ensuring retirees receive consistent payouts, according to proponents, but are susceptible to instability in the insurance market. If an insurance company files for bankruptcy or defaults on payments, annuity holders may lose their investment. The SECURE Act safeguards employers who offer annuities by preventing employees from suing if the annuity provider the employer selected goes bankrupt or defrauds clients.

The House approved the legislation 417-3 with Rep. Tom Reed voting in favor. “Our economy is booming after tax cuts. It only makes sense to make it easier for folks to save now that they have more money in their pocket,” Reed said in a news release last week.

NY Legislature Targets Trump

Last week the New York Legislature signed off on two pieces of legislation aimed at oversight of President Trump. The first, approved by the Assembly on Wednesday, would allow lawmakers in Washington to access New York tax returns (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-york-lawmakers-approve-release-of-trumps-state-tax-returns-to-congress-11558546468>) for residents who are federal officials, including President Trump. It authorizes the House Ways & Means committee, Senate Finance Committee or joint committee on taxation in Congress to request New Yorkers' state tax returns, which would provide similar information to the president's federal tax return documents.

The second measure passed last week would allow New York prosecutors to pursue state charges against a person who has been pardoned by the president on federal charges, limiting President Trump's ability to protect associates like Paul Manafort from prison time. A sitting president can currently pardon for federal crimes, but not state level convictions. New York law doesn't allow for double jeopardy, though, preventing similar prosecutions on both the federal and state level. The new law (<https://www.npr.org/2019/05/21/725495478/new-york-assembly-passes-bill-closing-double-jeopardy-loophole-as-rebuke-to-trum>) allows New York prosecutors to continue pressing charges against former Trump campaign Chairman Paul Manafort, who was sentenced to prison for a federal conviction last year, so that he could serve as state sentence if pardoned on federal charges.

Disaster Aid Bill Stalled

Congress tried to pass a disaster relief bill (<https://www.rollcall.com/news/congress/house-19-1-billion-disaster-aid-package-passage>) that would send funds to Puerto Rico, Texas, Florida and Mississippi River states before leaving for recess, but an objection from Rep. Chip Roy (R-Texas) slowed down the measure.

The disaster aid bill has been contentious, with President Trump originally trying to exclude additional aid for Puerto Rico while including funding for his declared national emergency on the Southern border. The Senate passed a relief bill 85-8 (https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=116&session=1&vote=00129) last Thursday, though, which would provide a total of \$19.1 billion in disaster aid including \$900 million for Puerto Rico, \$3 billion for Tyndall Air Force Base and other damaged military bases, and \$3 million for farmers who lost crops due to flooding in central states like Iowa. The Senate bill has Trump's support, as well as support from Senators Schumer and Gillibrand.

Democratic leaders plan to try again to pass the House measure by a consent vote over the recess, but it will likely be delayed until the full chamber returns on June 4 and can pass the bill through a traditional roll call vote.

Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

House Democrats passed a bill aimed at reversing Trump Administration rollbacks at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/30/democrats-aim-to-roll-back-anti-consumer-measures-at-nations-watchdog-agency.html>), which was established by the Obama Administration to strengthen oversight of financial institutions. Former Republican congressman and current interim White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney was appointed (<https://thehill.com/homenews/house/445081-house-rebukes-mulvaney-efforts-to-rein-in-consumer-bureau>) to head the CFPB with the aim at slashing the bureau's regulatory authority. Reed voted against the Democrats' measure (<http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2019/roll228.xml>) which ultimately passed along party lines 231-191.

Governor Signs Anti-Trash Incinerator Bill

Last week Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed a bill to ban trash incinerators (<https://ithacavoice.com/2019/05/cuomo-signs-legislation-to-block-trash-incinerators-in-finger-lakes/>) in the Finger Lakes region, bringing a bipartisan legislative initiative by Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton (D-Ithaca), Sen. Tom O'Mara (R-Big Flats) and other regional lawmakers across the finish line.

"I was happy to help usher this bill through the Assembly, and I'm very grateful to the Governor for his signature enacting it into law," said Lifton, who helped write the bill with Energy Committee Chair Michael Cusick. "This incinerator would have had an extremely detrimental impact on local communities and local agriculture and tourism," she said.

Sen. O'Mara likewise reacted to the news with a statement praising the bill on social media. "These trash incinerators are a serious threat to the quality, health, and overall safety of many communities throughout the Finger Lakes and Southern Tier regions. The Finger Lakes Community Preservation Act is a great credit to everyone who worked together and with all of us to secure its enactment, including winery owners, farmers, business and community leaders, and many concerned citizens," he said.

Schumer Backs Major NY Climate Legislation

Gov. Cuomo originally put the brakes on any new climate-focused legislation (https://blog.timesunion.com/capitol/archives/286579/cuomo-omits-climate-change-legislation-from-end-of-session-goals/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Timesunion_Capcon) for the 2019 session after a set of environmental bills passed last month, but that could change now that U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer has come out in favor of the

Community Climate Protection Act

(<https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/Schumer-backs-ambitious-state-climate-proposal-13870554.php>).

The act would establish a set of goals for New York to reduce its carbon emissions over the next few decades and convert half of the state's power generation to renewable sources by 2030. The governor is currently in negotiations with leaders in the legislature to avoid goals on carbon emissions and push back the timeline to switch over to generation from renewables. Assemblywoman Lifton is currently a cosponsor (https://assembly.state.ny.us/leg/?default_fld=&leg_video=&bn=A10342&term=2015&Summary=Y&Memo=Y&Text=Y) on the CCPA.


Gillibrand Proposes Curbing Facial Recognition

Sen. Gillibrand sent a letter to Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross last week urging him to exercise caution with U.S.-based facial recognition technology that might be used by China to prosecute and imprison ethnic Muslim populations. Following a New York Times report detailing the ways China is surveilling and controlling Uighurs (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/22/world/asia/china-surveillance-xinjiang.html>), an ethnic group found mostly in the Xinjiang Province, Gillibrand called for export controls on facial recognition technology so that U.S.-based products aren't used to commit human rights violations.


"Our country – including American innovation and expertise – should not play any role in helping China carry out violations of human rights in Xinjiang. I urge you to take my concerns into consideration while you continue to develop export controls on emerging technologies. They will help us protect our own country, and they can help stop the ongoing tragedy in Xinjiang."

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Government Section Underwriter

Tompkins County Recycling and Materials Management

Check out the new recycletompkins.org. It features a “Find My Recycling Day” tool that can display a customized calendar with all of your upcoming recycling collection dates. You can also sign up for automatic text, email, or call reminders...it even adjusts for holidays!



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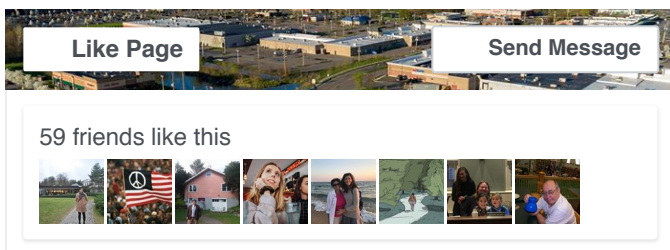
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Vaughn Golden is a freelance radio and print reporter covering politics around the southern tier and central New York. He authors the weekly "Capitol Watch" watchdog report on Ithaca's representatives in the New York legislature and Congress. Vaughn is a credentialed member of the Capitol Press corps and has reported for various outlets from the Capitol, Supreme Court and the White House.

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