

## A manifesto for our future

**Colin Read: Everybody's Business**

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— I congratulate Bill Owens on a remarkable campaign that led to his election as our congressman for the 23rd Congressional District of New York.

Some claim Tuesday was about a national move to the right. Isn't it more accurate to conclude it was about change? Incumbents who failed to make things better suffered that fateful night.

Our candidates ran good campaigns. While we were inundated with nasty political messages from outside, the candidates' messages were of hope and of strategies to sustain our region. They reinforced the North Country spirit that we would rather raise ourselves up than tear someone else down. And while we may individually be interested in broader national issues, we all recognize no national issue matters if the residents of the North Country cannot survive and thrive.

Now, the real work must begin.

Last week, I lamented that the Clinton County economy is fragile. The reasons are varied and require varied solutions.

Like elsewhere in the North Country, Clinton County faces a population decline. This is the unfortunate product of a number of forces. First, since the turn of the last century, agricultural employment has fallen from 41 percent to just over 1 percent of the workforce. This reduction dramatically affects rural areas. Rarely do young people take over the family farm any more. Instead, they go off to receive an education that will allow them to develop a career.

So bright and successful, our children find greater opportunities in big cities elsewhere. And once these young people are settled in an urban area, with a spouse they may have met in college or at work, and with children settled in school, it is difficult to draw them back to the North Country.

We've all seen this. Now that the campaigns are over, the question is — what can we do to generate high-quality jobs at home that can retain our children and attract young people from other areas? Our very future depends upon our ability to answer that question.

First, we must recognize the extent of the economic and demographic challenges ahead. Our leaders can help in creating that awareness. For instance, The Development Corporation's Institute for Development and Economic Analysis is sponsoring a forum this week that will assemble 50 local professionals and opinion makers to discuss the North Country's future and solicit solutions. A week later, we will present these ideas to our local political and economic leaders. This is the first step of an ongoing educational process that we hope will create a dialog from which solutions can flow spontaneously.

Second, we can replicate this exercise in every region of the North Country. Clinton County is one of many

regions in Upstate New York that are facing similar economic and demographic challenges.

Third, as awareness is created, it is incumbent upon our leaders, elected or not, to balance their immediate concerns with concerns that are much longer term. Our median age may go from 25 years old in 1990 to 50 by 2040. Sustainability demands we draw young people to our communities. Obviously, this challenge and opportunity is longer term than the tenure of any politician or community leader, elected or not.

Fourth, we must identify those things we do well, or can do well, that will feed into an increasingly global economy. It is difficult for us to compete with others who started earlier, but a late start should not deter us. Regions that need a bit of a helping hand so they can get up on their own two feet can legitimately ask government to offer temporary assistance in that transition. And with a terrific New York delegation in the Senate and with Congressman Owens that appreciate this need, now may be the best time to articulate our vision for 2040.

Fifth, we must discover what works for the North Country, and why, and replicate these success stories. The North Country is special because most all of us want others to succeed. This is a land where competitors actually help competitors. Just as was spoken at Congressman Owens' election-night speech, this is a community that takes our neighbor's cows in if the barn on the farm next door burns down. This is a community that lends each other assistance in an ice storm, sometimes even if it means delaying helping ourselves. This is a community that recognizes a rising tide raises all boats.

Sixth, we must continue with the good work of the likes of Garry Douglas, Adore Kurtz, Mark Barie, Bill Owens, Pat Russell and countless others who work tirelessly to attract Canadian business to our region. If we could figure out a way to bottle up this energy and allow every region in the North Country to replicate the great Clinton County success, we would really take off.

Seventh, our strong north-south transportation networks permit Clinton County to take great advantage of Canada-U.S. trade. We need to connect better with each other through efficient east-west arteries. This is a case of "build it and they will come." Both Mr. Owens and Ms. Scozzafava advocate an Interstate 98 that utilizes Route 11 to better connect Watertown and Syracuse to the Canton/Potsdam region, Malone, Champlain and Plattsburgh, and perhaps eventually through the north countries of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. You might wonder if we need such an artery. This artery would be less about us, and more about expanding our trade with Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes. There is a parallel road, Highway 401, in Canada that unfortunately bypasses our communities.

Eighth, we need our colleges to play a much greater role in economic development. They correctly argue that they generate jobs here. But so does every government agency through the employees they hire. Instead, we must expect them to create opportunities here. Our colleges must be out in the community, rubbing elbows alongside others trying to create vibrant economies. Our institutions are public servants first and employers second. We need the energy and ideas of our best and brightest.

Ninth, we need to recognize the resources up here beside the young people we hope to attract. This area is rich with possibilities for alternative energy. However, we have byzantine rules that require us to buy power from our energy companies at retail prices, but sell power back to them at wholesale prices. Utilities receive much aid and preferential treatment from our federal and state governments. It would not be too much to demand a fairer shake so small and medium scale alternative energy projects can become more viable.

And finally, we need to believe. Ideas are great, but a common sense of purpose and a hope for the future is the greatest motivator of all.

The work for Congressman Owens and our leaders is certainly cut out for them. We all wish them luck.

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