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# Hugh Reynolds: Facing the music

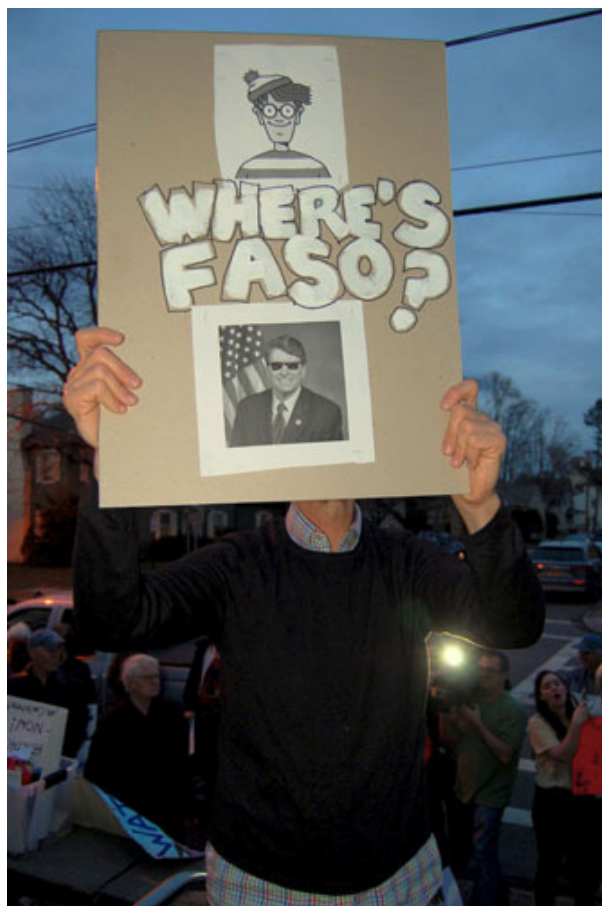
by [Hugh Reynolds](#) / August 21, 2017 / 2 comments

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It's probably not a good thing when a freshman congressman gets huge headlines after announcing his first town hall meeting with his constituents eight months into his term.

But it is news. After resisting calls by constituents to hold such meetings for more than half a year, U.S. Rep. **John Faso** announced last week he will host a public forum on Thursday, Aug. 31 from 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at Esopus Town Hall in Port Ewen.

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Answer: In Port Ewen on Aug. 31. (photo by Dan Barton)

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Who knows? Truth may emerge, if not perspective, from this carefully staged event.

Faso generally refuses to meet in open session with his constituents, preferring small private gatherings, Republican fundraisers and office visits — situations he can control. The bipartisan rules for this event read like something from the Vietnam peace talks.

Judging from the congressman's press release announcing the forum, this was quite an adversarial situation. Details were "hammered out" (now, there's an action verb) over a three-month back and forth with Move Forward New York, according to the release. Faso in the release described Move Forward New York as a "left-leaning organization of citizen activists."

"Left-leaning" hardly does justice to Move Forward. They're progressive Democrats, the same folks, incidentally, who lost the last presidential election. Faso is a proud and predictable right-leaning conservative Republican. I sense sparks, which is to say, they'd better have sufficient security to separate the more excitable types.

Elected rather handily over a progressive Democrat in a district almost evenly divided between the major parties, Faso may welcome the left leaning on him. All the better to shore up his base. But that was then, this is now.

Seating will be limited to 200 persons. More than 500, minus Faso, turned out at a similar event in Kingston last winter. And doesn't that seem like such a long time ago? By agreement 70 seats have been allocated to the Faso camp, 70 to Move Forward, with 60 tickets on a first-come, first-served basis. I'm assuming those tickets are already gone, at least eight scooped up by the announced Democratic candidates for Faso's seat.

Faso, who seems to have had the whip hand in negotiating the terms of engagement, appar-

ently had little choice in agreeing to the even split, if only to appear as a paragon of fairness. A political operative of the first order, Faso knows full well that 70 fist-shaking, nostril-flaring progressives will easily out-demonstrate an equal number of sedate conservatives. That is, if they can find enough Faso Republicans to fill those seats. For guidance, I offer the immortal line from *Casablanca*: Round up the usual suspects.



Faso did secure at least one important advantage. As the sitting congressman, he reserved the right to deliver a 10-minute opening address to the gathering, setting a tone, at least for a while.

Given the rowdy times we live in and the built-up frustration with Faso's tactics, it remains for moderators **Gerry Benjamin** and Move Forward's **Debra Clinton** to keep it civil and, to borrow a brand, move things forward.

Moderators are key to even-handed treatment and decorum. It seems to me that moderators for such events should at least be known moderates, if not demonstrably neutral. Maybe an impartial media type, so hard to find these days. I assume Ms. Clinton (great name) will be up to the task of protecting her side's interests. Republican Benjamin certainly is. A political science professor at SUNY New Paltz and the brains behind a regional think tank on public affairs Benjamin was an early, enthusiastic endorser of his long-time friend, candidate Faso.

With ears ever to the ground, Faso may understand how he dug himself a hole with this no-town-hall tactic. First impressions count for much and this one moved the needle. Let's see whether Esopus provides the way forward.



## College bound

Despite brave pronouncements, it appears to me the drive for “free tuition” at state colleges is off to a slow start, at least in Ulster County. SUNY Ulster President **Al Roberts** tells us that after an extensive publicity and outreach effort since June, only 10 have enrolled in what the state calls its Excelsior program for college students. Ten applicants, mostly in the 18-to-25-year range. Comparable figures from state schools in adjacent counties were unavailable.

The program, announced with so much fanfare as the first of its kind in the country, makes families with household incomes of less than \$125,000 eligible for free tuition. Books, fees and student housing are not included. Median household income in Ulster County is about \$60,000, tuition at SUNY Ulster about \$2,400 a semester.

Typical of Albany hype, applicants found the reality is somewhat different. Excelsior is considered “last dollar,” say officials. That means it only applies after a student has been granted aid via existing state and federal assistance programs.

Roberts, a buoyant optimist, didn’t express disappointment, but it had to sting after all that bling. Hey, it’s a start. Hurrah if it allows even 10 more young folks to attend college who otherwise couldn’t.

## Here and there

I thought Dutchess County Executive **Marc Molinaro**'s forthright, specific statements condemning "evil" racism after the Charlottesville horror some of the most relevant on record. Timely, too. Molinaro said he was visiting family nearby and drove over to Charlottesville for a first-hand assessment.

On a lighter note, I can't help but get agitated over reports that Kingston officials are seriously considering legislating the height of lawns in the city. Understood, the nannies have taken over City Hall, but this?

Imagine some alderman campaigning door-to-door this fall.

"Sir, your lawn looks a little shaggy out there."

"So what? It's my lawn."

"Well, we're working on legislation that makes that an offense."

"What? Are you supporting that?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm a prime sponsor."

"Get the hell off my porch. And don't trip on the grass!"

Surely — don't call me Shirley! — these people have better things to do.

This one, like the now dead seed I planted last spring, should be given a decent burial.

Under the heading of summer's gone, the Ulster Hibernians will be sponsoring their 16th annual Hooley (harvest) on the Hudson (actually on the Rondout) on Sept. 3, from 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. "Hooley weather" usually draws crowds of around 15,000.

For many years, former congressman **Maurice Hinchey** opened festivities with a rousing version of "Galway Bay." Alas, the wee lad is, sadly, under the weather these days. His legacy will live on as advocate and dogged procurer of federal funding for the remarkable renovation of the Rondout waterfront, where the free festival is held every year.



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**Catherine Joyner** August 22, 2017 at 12:20 am

I don't think you can really call this a town hall when in reality only sixty seats are available to the general public. Questions have to be written in advance and then they decide which ones will be answered. Why is Faso afraid to really meet with his constituents? Wouldn't it be better if he held a town hall in a place that holds more people and easier to find? Wouldn't it be nice if he held a town hall NOT the day before Labor day? Makes you wonder if he is trying to limit the crowd. I would think it would be fairer if everyone had to wait on line and everyone was given a fair chance to get in, then he picks seat numbers by random draw given everyone an equal chance of asking him a question. It would be nice if it was more organic and people were allowed to ask questions they might think of when the Congressman answers a neighbors question instead of having to write them down and get them "approved" ahead of time....My one question for John Faso would be why has he not spoken out against Trump's comments regarding Virginia, why has he not spoken out about the Trump's campaign ties with Russia? Well I guess that's two questiona but my chances of getting in to seeing him and then being picked to answer a question, well I think my chances of winning the lottery are probably about the same



**endrun** August 25, 2017 at 6:29 pm

Of all the town halls in the woild, he has to walk into the one in Esopus. And on his terms. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday...myahhhh, someday.  
I rate it in terms of golf, at least a Bogey. The only question is...will he take a Mulligan?!

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