

Local forums on constitutional convention

By *FRITZ MAYER*

SULLIVAN COUNTY, NY — New York State voters this year will be asked if the state should have a constitutional convention. If the answer is “yes,” the delegates to a convention would be elected in 2018, and voters would be asked to vote on any proposed amendments in 2019.

The group called We Are One-Sullivan is sponsoring a forum to discuss the pros and cons of a convention and what alternatives exist for making changes. The speakers will be Barry Kaufman, from the New York State Alliance of Retired Americans, which has publicly opposed a convention; Michael Kink, from the Strong Economy for All Coalition, which has also opposed a convention; and Wes Gillingham, from Catskill Mountainkeeper, who did not respond to an email asking his position.

The forum will be held on Thursday, October 5 from 6:15 to 8:15 p.m. at the Liberty Senior Citizens Center at 119 North Main St., Liberty. The event is free and open to the public, and there will be an opportunity to ask questions and get answers. For more information, call 845/292-4895.

We Are One-Sullivan is an informal group of Sullivan County residents concerned with the issues affecting our county, state and nation.

Another forum—or debate—on the constitutional convention has been announced by the Sullivan County Legislature, to be held October 11 at 6 p.m. in the Seelig Theater at SUNY Sullivan, 112 College Rd., Loch Sheldrake. The debate will be between Professor Gerald Benjamin, associate vice president for regional engagement for the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, who has expressed support for a constitutional convention; and Michael Grubiak, a regional political organizer from New York State United Teachers, which has argued against a constitutional convention

There will also be a program on the constitutional convention on WJFF on October 30 at 7 p.m., featuring Benjamin.

Many critics of the convention argue that the process will be controlled by the wealthy and powerful and will not result in amendments that will benefit the majority of state residents. While that seems to be true for the 1967 convention, it is clearly not true for the 1938 convention.

According to most accounts of the 1967 convention, it was run by the existing political class, and in fact it came about because the state legislature initiated the process; it was not the result of the voters answering “yes” to the question of a constitutional convention, which appears on the ballot every 20 years.

The delegates, who were mostly politicians, members of the state courts system and others who were well connected, came up with many proposed amendments, which for the most part would have improved individual rights in the areas of education, local government and would have included the adoption of a bill of rights. However, one amendment would have repealed the Blaine Amendment, which dates to 1894. The Blaine Amendment generally prohibits spending public money on religious schools. The people in charge of the process decided to offer the voters an all-or-nothing proposition: either accept all of the proposed changes or accept none. According to many accounts of the time, voters said “no” to the whole package rather than accept the repeal of the Blaine Amendment.

This was not the experience of the 1938 convention. In that case, delegates proposed amendments addressing adoption of Social Security and other social programs, housing, the right of workers to organize and expanding other worker protections. There were 57 proposed changes, separated into nine amendments or ballot questions. Voters said “yes” to six of the amendments and “no” to three of them.