

## NY governor's race quiet on upstate issues

By Amanda Fries



New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, left, and Republican gubernatorial candidate Marc Molinaro, right, argue during the New York gubernatorial debate hosted by CBS 2 chief political correspondent Marcia Kramer, second from left, and WCBS Newsradio 880 reporter Rich Lamb, Tuesday, Oct. 23, 2018, in New York. less

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, left, and Republican gubernatorial candidate Marc Molinaro, right, argue during the New York gubernatorial debate hosted by CBS 2 chief political correspondent Marcia Kramer, second ... more

Photo: Mary Altaffer, AP



FILE - In this combination photo, New York Republican gubernatorial candidate Marc Molinaro, left, speaks at a news conference in New York on Sept. 14, 2018, and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, right, speaks a news conference in in Tarrytown; N.Y., on May 8, 2018. Cuomo is balking at requests to debate his opponents, potentially leaving New Yorkers without the chance to see the candidates for governor face each other before the Nov. 6 election. Molinaro had asked for a one-on-one debate with the two-term incumbent, and three third-party candidates had pushed for a more inclusive exchange. (AP Photos/Bebeto Matthews, left, and Julio Cortez, Files) less

FILE - In this combination photo, New York Republican gubernatorial candidate Marc Molinaro, left, speaks at a news conference in New York on

Sept. 14, 2018, and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, right, speaks a news ... more

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- New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, left, and Republican gubernatorial candidate Marc Molinaro, right, argue during the New York gubernatorial debate hosted by CBS 2 and WCBS Newsradio 880, Tuesday, Oct. 23, 2018, in New York. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer, Pool) Photo: Mary Altaffer / Pool AP

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, left, and Republican gubernatorial candidate Marc Molinaro, right, argue during the New York gubernatorial debate hosted by CBS 2 and WCBS Newsradio 880, Tuesday, Oct. 23, 2018, in New York. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer, Pool) less

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ALBANY — Many issues important to upstate New Yorkers have been an after-thought in a governor's race that, like other statewide elected positions, is likely to be decided by the votes cast south of Westchester County.

The upstate-downstate divide has long been a factor in statewide races, with New York's political power base — and Democratic epicenter — entrenched in the greater New York City area.

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The issue of forgotten upstaters surfaced during Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's Democratic primary with actress and activist Cynthia Nixon. It reared itself again this week when Cuomo and GOP challenger Marc Molinaro faced off in a one-hour debate that elicited one exchange on point for upstate New York — funding a new stadium for the NFL's Buffalo Bills.

“There was no specific discussion about upstate's declining population, the state's job-killing business climate or crumbling local roads and bridges,” Unshackled Upstate said in a statement following the debate. “We urge Andrew Cuomo and Marc Molinaro to engage in an upstate-focused debate before Election Day so voters can finally hear how these candidates will tackle the issues plaguing our economy. Ignoring the very real concerns of millions of upstate taxpayers is completely unacceptable.”

As Dutchess County executive, Molinaro is acutely aware of the challenges of upstate communities and said his policy positions come from that perspective, but without a governor focusing on those issues, it has garnered little attention.

"When the governor doesn't engage, you don't get the focus," he said. "The future of upstate New York is not only critical to the race, it is critical to the health and well-being of the state of New York. We need a governor who understands how difficult it is to live in upstate New York with the burden of taxes and the need for job growth."

Many of these concerns are echoed by third-party candidates who were excluded from Tuesday's debate. The uninvited were former Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner, who is running as an independent; repeat-gubernatorial Green Party candidate Howie Hawkins, and Long Island business owner Larry Sharpe, the Libertarian candidate.

Cuomo's campaign claims that under his leadership he's kept state spending under 2 percent while capping Medicaid costs to localities and reforming the state pension system for expected savings, which the governor contends helps all communities.

Further, the governor has made funding available to those governments that share services and continues to support multi-billion-dollar plans to improve infrastructure across the state, including the Albany International Airport and the Schenectady Train Station, according to the campaign.

Cuomo declined a request to be interviewed for this story.

Abbey Collins, a campaign spokesperson, said Cuomo's record on upstate growth speaks for itself.

"The governor's proven leadership has delivered real results from Albany to Elmira – investing a record \$44 billion, cutting unemployment nearly in half, growing wages, and the highest number of private-sector jobs on record at 3.1 million," Collins said in a statement. "New Yorkers know they can count on Gov. Cuomo to get the job done for upstate New York."

Population and political power is concentrated downstate, with statewide leadership typically filled by politicians from the Long Island and greater New York City area.

Of the 19.8 million people living in New York, about 11.5 million are clustered south of Westchester County, according to 2017 U.S. Census figures.

Gerald Benjamin, a political scientist at the state University of New York at New Paltz, said upstate leadership is rarely floated because those lawmakers are not often known in more heavily populated areas, but that doesn't mean elected officials forget about the rest of the state. He pointed out the race has focused a lot on property taxes, which is an issue across the state.

"We have to be a little careful about upstaters filtering their perception through a lens that wants to find a disadvantage," he said. "Sometimes there is, sometimes there isn't."

There may still be hope for a gubernatorial debate that touches on issues outside of New York City. The three, third-party candidates and Molinaro have agreed to a forum sponsored by the League of Women Voters of New York at The College of Saint Rose in Albany on Nov. 1 at 6 p.m. The governor has yet to accept the invitation.

Even though the campaigns may not be focusing on upstate issues, that doesn't mean the candidates don't have ideas on how to address the myriad hurdles the communities face.

Miner, who once led the state's Democratic Committee and was a Cuomo ally, proposes doing away with the state's economic development programs and using the funding for infrastructure improvements, including broadband.

The programs "have been mired in corruption and just existed for the government to pick winners," she said. "We should be taking all that money that we're currently wasting on economic development programs that aren't working, and aren't creating jobs, and invest in traditional and modern infrastructure."

Other candidates suggest more sweeping changes that they say would spark growth in communities that need it most.

Sharpe said licenses and regulations for businesses should be reduced, taxation rules simplified, and innovative ideas encouraged.

If a business sells locally, they should be exempt from federal regulations, he said. By selling naming rights to bridges and roads to big corporations, like Google or Coca-Cola, Sharpe said New York could bring in revenue to do the necessary repairs.

"The actual idea is to grow the community. Give incentives to make them strong, better, faster," he said. "Fix the root cause and stop putting in these horrible Band-Aids."

On the flip side, Hawkins – who lives in Syracuse – wants to make single-payer healthcare and 100 percent renewable energy a reality in New York while instituting tax reforms, increasing AIM funding and improving infrastructure.

"A top issue for local government is to get the support they should from the state, and not have the state balance its budget on the backs of local property taxpayers," Hawkins said. "Secondly, local governments should have more home rule. The Legislature should focus on state issues, not micromanaging local government."