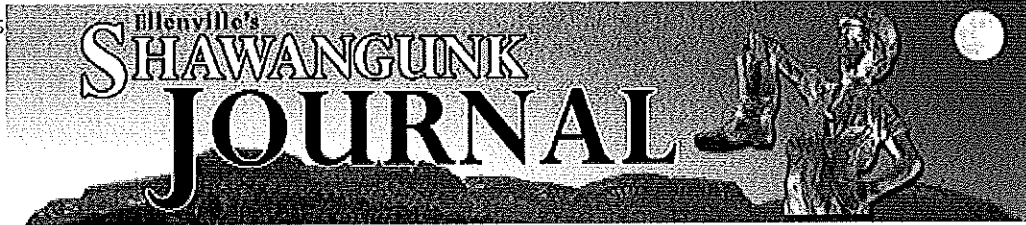


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## Opinion

### Constant Modest Steps Equal a Big Leap: The Ulster County Executive's First Six Months

By Philip Ehrensaft, *Metro Countryside Research*

When a majority of Ulster County voters decided that we should follow the lead of other New York State counties in having an executive branch of government, and that our executive should be independently elected rather than appointed by the legislature, we did not know how timely our decision would turn out. The first elected County Executive would step into office on January 1, 2009: just in time to deal with the mountain of local troubles induced by the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Ulster's new County Executive, Mike Hein, entered office facing that old Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times."

On June 30, Hein delivered an updated State of the County address at a dinner meeting of the Southern Ulster County Chamber of Commerce. This follow-up to the original State of the County Address delivered to the Legislature last February, plus a subsequent First 100 Days presentation, focused on economic development. In effect, we got a "First Six Months" progress report.

Evaluating that report is difficult because of the unbalanced information situation in Ulster County. Not to mince words: information about Ulster County government is mostly sparse, mediocre, or both. But now is now.

On the other hand, the communications from Hein's office are clear, well documented, and focused — as one would expect both from Hein himself and from Vincent Martello, a communications professional and former supervisor of Marbletown who left the private sector to join the Executive staff.

Then there's the fact that communications from the administrative



branch of Ulster County's government are tightly centralized and controlled in the County Executive's office.

To be fair to Hein and his team, they have inherited some very rotten bureaus that are badly in need of cleaning up. In his position, you or I would probably control information the same way if we had to deal with folks who are quite ready to disperse "information" that would impede the cleanup.

But not having independent information does create a vacuum in coming to an objective evaluation of what the executive branch of our county government is doing.

Doing the best that I can within these limits, my read is in the title of this column: Constant Modest Steps Equal a Big Leap. Add up all the incremental steps that Hein and his team have instituted in the last six months, and you have a considerable leap towards the government that Ulster County needs for the twenty-first century. Finally.

But there is one potential downside during an economic crisis, when spending stimulus is badly needed from all levels of government: national, state, and local. The new County Executive has taken admirable steps towards savings via more efficient practices. Joining a consortium to purchase energy at discounted prices would be one example. More than \$200,000 has been saved to date.

If, however, in a time of crisis, the saved funds are used for solid stimulus programs, there's a double gain. If they simply are not spent, what made sense when the economy is functioning well does not make sense when the prime need is to put people and businesses to work.

For example, there's a self-described aggressive campaign to reduce the county payroll through attrition. That might sound good on the face of things, but I've seen firsthand what attrition policy does in academia. Younger, dynamic people don't get hired. Organizational performance declines. In bad times, the local economy doesn't get needed stimulus from the salaries paid to the newly hired.

On stimulus funding as a whole, Hein and his team have done well for Ulster County, to the tune of over \$27 million. Besides being an obviously go-getter negotiator, it doesn't hurt Hein to be a member of the national party in power, nor to have Ulster County within the district of a senior congressional representative, Maurice Hinchey.

Bipartisanship, in the same spirit as the Obama administration, has also been a welcome hallmark of the new County Executive. A bipartisan task force on Ulster County's economic development was formed before Hein took office. Watching the give and take during the long question and answer period at the June 30 Southern Ulster County Chamber of Commerce dinner, with people from all parts of the political spectrum, my read is that Hein's bipartisanship is more than window dressing.

And it was also refreshing to dialogue with a politician who's not a lawyer.

Rather than a grand overall vision for improving the performance of Ulster County's executive branch, we heard about a series of modest steps that, added together, show much promise. For example: breaking the stalemate over much needed new office space for the county government, including the use of in-house labor by county employees, with 70 percent cost savings over the initial low estimate.

Or putting GPS units in all county vehicles in order to monitor that they are being used strictly for government work, with the eventual goal of lowering the number of vehicles in the county fleet.

Or performing a systematic audit of energy consumption by the county government, and then using a portion of the new stimulus funds to meet the efficiency targets identified by the audit.

Or moving towards a consortium of banks that could facilitate loans to businesses that would not meet current risk standards for startup or expanding companies.

Or instituting bus service to Ulster County from the Poughkeepsie train station as part of a strategy to increase tourism by people who do not have, or who do not wish to use, horsepower from an automobile.

None of these measures, and I've only given a partial list, are earth-shaking in themselves. But the sum total to date is very respectable, and holds much promise for the future.

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