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Surprise! Late Budget Becomes A Political Hot Potato

By Colby Hamilton

This year, Senate challengers are expected to use the passage of the [125-days-late state budget](#) as a hammer with which to clobber their opponents. While few voters report having much sympathy for Albany lawmakers, they should note that not all clobbering is created equal.

[Mary Wilmot](#), the Democrat hoping to unseat Senator [Jim Alesi](#) in Monroe County, and [Bob Cohen](#), who hopes to the same for Sen. [Suzi Oppenheimer](#) in Westchester, both fired off press releases yesterday going after their opponents on the budget. Wilmot, a Democrat, and Cohen, a Republican, are likely joined by many potential constituents who are fed up with the state's legislature.

But they also attacked their respective opponents on issues that some independent groups say are actually necessary reforms.

Wilmot took issue with the Legislature's decision to [eliminate the Empire Zone program](#), which provided businesses with various tax credits and incentives to locate in these zones. Basically, she accused the Legislature, and by proxy her opponent, of being job killers.

"The Legislature adopted laws providing for incentives to create and maintain jobs in New York," she was quoted saying in her press release. "Now, to compensate for a 7.6 percent increase in state spending, it reneges on its promise after the facilities have been developed. All future New York job creation initiatives are dead on arrival."

According to Ron Deutsch, executive director for New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness, the Empire Zone program has been DOA for years. Deutsch has [expressed his support](#) for eliminating the program in the past.

"It's been documented year after year the abuses of this program," he said. "It wasn't creating the jobs that were promised. It was time for it to be eliminated."

The [Citizens Budget Commission](#) is also happy to see the Empire Zone program gone. CBC has, in the past, been highly critical of the program. In a [2008 study](#), the group found that nearly 60 percent of the job promises made under the program were not kept. Elimination of the program, according to CBC, will save the state nearly \$600 million annually.

Looking at the post-budget situation in Westchester, Cohen found the \$1.4 billion in cuts to education unacceptable.

"As the chair of the Senate Education Committee, Senator Oppenheimer should be leading efforts to reform the state school aid formula so districts do not have to endure billions in cuts any given year," Cohen was quoted as saying in his release.

The CBC, however, said that the cuts were done in a way to do the least amount of harm to the most vulnerable.

"These cuts adhere to the Executive Budget and are targeted to wealthier school districts and do less harm to the neediest districts," CBC's Elizabeth Lynam said [in a blog post yesterday](#). "School aid comprises nearly one-third of the State's own-source spending, and it must be addressed if spending is to be contained in future years."

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