

Cuomo names members of regional economic development council

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Top officials from Finch Paper, Irving Tissue and Stewart's Shops lead the list of locals named to a regional economic development council by Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

The Capital Region council will serve eight counties between Albany and Glens Falls; it's one of 10 in New York that will coordinate economic development on a regional level and compete for state funding.

The governor has spent the week debuting the groups, which are part of his effort to revamp New York's approach to recruiting and retaining businesses.

While announcing the Capital Region group on Thursday, Cuomo said the councils will send a clear message that New York is open for business while retiring the one-size-fits-all economic development philosophy.

"With the regional councils, we will empower individual areas like Capital Region to chart their own course for economic growth, bringing jobs and investment to New York," Cuomo said.

The local group will be chaired by the CEO of SEFCU and the president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Roughly 30 other people have also been appointed as members. Among them are Joseph F. Raccuia, president and CEO of Finch Paper in Glens Falls; Gary Dake, president of Stewart's Shops in Malta; Bill Hart, the controller for Irving Tissue in Fort Edward; Omar Usmani, executive partner of Aeon Nexus Corp. in Glens Falls; Peg Murphy, human resources director for Espey Manufacturing in Saratoga Springs; and Christine Edgerly, president of Adirondack Mechanical Services LLC in Wilton.

Elected officials, including chairmen of the county boards of supervisors, will participate as ex-officio members.

As meetings begin over the next week, the councils' first directive will be to create a regional development plan to be used to compete for funding.

About \$200 million will be divided among regions based on the strength of the councils' plans. The top four regions will receive \$40 million each in capital grants and Excelsior tax credits; the remaining \$40 million will be split among the bottom six regions.

In addition, state agencies have identified \$800 million, along with other incentives, that the councils will be able to request using one streamlined application.

The goal, according to the governor's office, is to come up with projects that align state resources and policies, eliminate barriers to growth and streamline the delivery of government services and programs.

The councils will convene at a statewide conference in September, and applications are due in November for the awards.

Dennis Brobston, president of the Saratoga County Economic Development Corp., said the region is well-positioned to compete for funds, and he is keeping an open mind as he heads into the first meeting.

"We all have differences in assets and infrastructure," Brobston said. "We will figure out what's best for everyone, and that's the point of the council."

Warren County and Glens Falls city officials applauded the council's formation on Thursday.

EDC Warren County President Vicki Pratt Gerbino said the ground-up, competitive approach will bring transparency to the process and ensure the region's stakeholders are thinking about the big picture.

"I like the fact that Gov. Cuomo and this team is talking about economic development from that perspective," she said.

But the announcement did generate some questions about whether Warren and Washington counties will be overshadowed by their larger neighbors.

Nicholas Caimano, chairman of the Warren-Washington Counties Industrial Development Agency, said the local representatives will

have an uphill battle when it comes to local allocation of resources.

"We are totally overmatched in this new regional economic development group," he said. "We have terrific representation, but we are overmatched."

Tori Riley, president and executive director of the Washington County Local Development Corp., said the concept is strong, though she also had initial reservations about being grouped with the Capital Region instead of the North County.

"We are grouped with some real heavy hitters," she said, adding that the assignment can also be seen as an advantage. "It will make us a whole lot better and expose Albany to what is going on in the North Country."

Dan Stec, chairman of the Warren County Board of Supervisors, said it's important to remember that more than 90 percent of Warren County is inside the Adirondack Park. However, he said being included in the Capital Region is to the county's advantage in many ways.

"I really believe the rising tide lifts all boats," he said.

Joseph Raccuia of Finch Paper, who will represent Warren County on the council, agreed. He said a regional partnership will benefit the local area, and it's encouraging to see the governor and lieutenant governor run the state like a business. "There's no doubt in my mind that's what's going to turn the state around," he said. "They are empowering regions to develop and chart their own futures. ... That's smart business."

The local group spans Warren, Washington, Saratoga, Albany, Columbia, Greene, Rensselaer and Schenectady counties.

Also on Thursday, Cuomo debuted the North Country Regional Economic Development Council, which spans Essex, Clinton, Franklin, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties.