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The Week That Was

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1. Billion\$ of Reasons

Our Spin:

At a lengthy, packed, and at times very intense hearing in Albany on Tuesday, lawmakers heard from hospitals, health care leaders, municipal officials, patients, advocates, union leaders and others on the issue of a single payer health care system in New York. The idea has been floated around the state Legislature for more than two decades, but the bill may finally stand a chance now that Democrats have control of both houses. All agreed that the goal of providing comprehensive, universal coverage to New Yorkers is laudable but whether single-payer is the system to achieve that led to spirited debates that sometimes led to exchanges between supporters in the crowd and lawmakers on the panel.

The Story:

The New York State legislature held a daylong hearing Tuesday on a proposal to enact single-payer health care in New York. Supporters and opponents debated whether it's the answer to the state's health care gaps.

Assembly Health Committee Chair Richard Gottfried, a Democrat and prime sponsor of the legislation, known as the New York Health Act, laid out the problem from his perspective. Millions of New Yorkers have some form of health coverage, he said. But many still face financial obstacles from private insurance companies in getting the care they need, because of unaffordable co-pays or coverage denials. "Either we say 'that's not acceptable but oh, that's too bad', or we do something about it," Gottfried said.

Dr. Mitch Katz is head of the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation, which oversees public hospitals in New York. He supports single-payer health care for the state. He says in his practice, he routinely encounters glaring holes

in the private health insurance system. "We're currently in mediation with a for-profit insurance company that says that a three-year-old boy brought to one of our emergency rooms with a fever of 103 and unresponsive should have been treated as an outpatient," Katz said. "No responsible doctor would have sent that child home."

A Rand Corporation study in August 2018 found that total health care spending would be slightly lower under the plan, but it would require \$139 billion in additional state revenue to make the transition. That's an amount that some state lawmakers, including Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, say is too high. The Rand study also found that employers would ultimately pay less money under a payroll tax in the measure than they currently pay to health insurance companies for premiums.

Opponents include business groups, and many hospitals, as well as some labor unions. Kevin Dahill is with the Suburban Hospital Alliance, which represents hospitals in nine suburban New York counties. He says single-payer health care would "unquestionably" result in the closure of hospitals, because the reimbursement for services could be set at the current rates for Medicare and Medicaid, which pay about 80% of the actual cost of care. He says that's not enough to pay all of a hospital's expenses. "We take care of those patients at a financial loss, that's only made up by way of our negotiation with the private insurers," said Dahill.

2. Shots Fired

Our Spin:

For the second time in two days, Governor Cuomo hit the airwaves earlier in the week taking aim at fellow Democrats in the state Legislature, saying they're dragging their feet on the legalization of marijuana and other priorities as the legislative

session winds down. It didn't take long for Democratic Senate Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins to shoot back, shrugging off the criticism, saying lawmakers are working hard to reach consensus on several issues while adding that the Governor must be "stressed" because of the demands of the end of the session.

The Story:

The leader of the state Senate, Andrea Stewart-Cousins, says the pressures of forging agreements on major pieces of legislation might be getting to Governor Andrew Cuomo. She was asked about disparaging comments that Cuomo made about the Senate in recent days.

Cuomo, in radio interviews over the past couple of days, has said Democrats, who lead the Senate for the first time in over a decade, are not doing enough in the waning days of the session to pass major legislation. He did acknowledge that they approved major bills like strengthening abortion rights and expanded voting earlier this year.

"You don't win a ballgame because you scored in the first inning and then you didn't score for the additional eight. This is not justified — all the time and effort that has gone into electing a Democratic Senate," Cuomo said on Albany public radio station WAMC.

Cuomo appeared to compare the Democrats to Republican President Donald Trump after the sponsor of a bill to legalize marijuana said the Senate does not currently have the votes to pass it. "Donald Trump is against legalizing marijuana and for the Senate to now say they don't have the votes to pass it, which is what the sponsor of the bill said, I mean, what was the point?" he said.

Stewart-Cousins, the chamber's first female and African American woman leader, said she's not taking the governor's comments personally. "I just think he gets stressed during these times," Stewart-Cousins said. "I guess he gets particularly animated during these stressful times, and we are coming to the end of session. Everybody has their way of coping. I prefer to keep my eye on getting the work done."

Stewart-Cousins said she expects the Senate to end the session as it began with the passage of several major pieces of legislation. And she said some might come as a result of agreements with the Democratic-led state Assembly, and not the governor.

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3. And The Nominees Are...

Our Spin:

New year. New roles. Third term. It seems like the Governor is changing his rotation more than the Yankees bull pen. For us in the lobbying world we know better than to delete their contact information but rather update it over weekend.

The Story:

The state Senate has begun to confirm Governor Andrew Cuomo's picks to lead a number of top agency posts as the

final weeks of session approach. The Senate Finance Committee advanced more than a dozen nominations over the course of a marathon meeting that lasted late into the afternoon Thursday, picking up after many — but not all — of those nominees received the approval of the relevant committee earlier this week.

Five of those 12 were set for a full floor vote later Thursday before lawmakers retired for the week. They were Guillermo Linares, Angela Fernandez, Carolyn Pokorny, Allen Riley and Erik Kulleseid. The proceedings were a bit of a formality, as many of the nominees already are serving at their respective state agencies in an acting capacity — some for months.

As is typical, many of the nominees were uncontroversial, and their appearances before various Senate committees consisted of the reading of a brief biography and highlights of their qualifications, platitudes from lawmakers and the occasional question — largely about parochial issues.

"You've probably done pretty much every other job, so you probably know what you're walking into," state Senate Finance Chairwoman Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan) told Keith Corlett, the nominee for New York State Police superintendent. He previously held a litany of top jobs including deputy superintendent.

Others spent more time in the hot seat, but ultimately, their nominations were never close to imperiled. Angela Fernandez, Cuomo's pick for commissioner of the state Division of Human Rights, faced scrutiny for not appearing at last Friday's sexual harassment hearing. Still, the Finance Committee appearance was considerably breezier for her compared with Wednesday, when members of the Investigations and Government Operations Committee and Ethics Committee pressed Fernandez for nearly half an hour.

"We missed you at the hearing Friday; I really wish you had been there," state Sen. Alessandra Biaggi (D-Westchester) said. Biaggi repeatedly asked Fernandez to commit to having DHR help lawmakers craft a package of reforms to sexual harassment policies. But Fernandez said that giving the Legislature opinions like those it provides the governor's office would be "irresponsible" because it could be used against the agency in litigation. State Sen. James Skoufis (D-Orange) questioned that assertion since much of that interagency communication already is subject to public records law. Fernandez offered to meet with lawmakers to discuss some of these issues. Biaggi later thanked Fernandez for sitting through and responding to her questions.

Among the other nominees was Linda Lacewell, a longtime Cuomo administration insider who was nominated as supervisor of the Department of Financial Services, which oversees the banking and insurance industries. Lacewell succeeds Maria Vullo, who left in February and whose subsequent nomination for an unpaid post at the New York Mortgage Agency was also considered Tuesday.

