



Published on *Citizens' Committee for an Effective Constitution* (<http://nyconstitution.org>)

---

## News Coverage on Pensions

### Criticism of Cuomo Over Plight of Cities Raises Syracuse Mayor's Profile

[Jesse McKinley](#) <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup>

04/02/2013

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/02/nyregion/for-syracuse-mayor-stephanie-a-miner-...> <sup>[3]</sup>

SYRACUSE — Stephanie A. Miner, the mayor of Syracuse, boarded a plane from Newark Liberty International Airport a couple of weeks ago for a quick flight to her beloved hometown. Shortly after takeoff, however, something went wrong: the cabin filled with smoke, the temperature inside the plane plunged, and a very concerned flight attendant ordered all passengers to the back of the aircraft.

The plane made a safe emergency landing, but not before Ms. Miner had a few terrifying moments to reflect on a year that has already included a few hair-raising incidents, not the least of which came when Ms. Miner, a first-term mayor in a second-tier city, publicly criticized her party's leader, Gov. [Andrew M. Cuomo](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, for what she said had been insufficient assistance to the state's many struggling cities and towns.

In the weeks since, Ms. Miner has gone from a simple position of power in Democratic ranks — she serves as the state party's co-chairwoman, a position Mr. Cuomo picked her for — to a more complex role: equal parts hometown hero and the de facto leader of a wider movement to advocate for suffering cities, both upstate and elsewhere. The region faces a multitude of problems: declining or stagnant population growth, faltering economies, pension and debt woes, as well as a political concern — what Ms. Miner and others see as the inability of a series of governors to confront the situation.

“She had no interest in getting into a fight with the governor,” said Richard Ravitch, a former lieutenant governor and a friend and mentor of Ms. Miner. “But she found herself as the only one who was willing to say, ‘Hey, let’s sit down and figure out what the long-term answer is.’ ”

After Mr. Cuomo said in a January speech that the answer for struggling municipalities could not be to come to the state asking for a check, Ms. Miner objected, saying that there needed to be a more comprehensive approach to helping cities. And she wrote [an article](#) <sup>[5]</sup> published on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times on Feb. 14 that criticized the governor's proposal to allow local governments to defer a portion of their pension costs by choosing a fixed contribution rate below a higher current one. She accused the governor of avoiding reality and lacking leadership, and likened his proposal to policies "that plunged New York City into a fiscal crisis in the mid-1970s."

The criticism continued last month, after Mr. Cuomo and legislative leaders in Albany agreed to a plan, supported by the state comptroller, Thomas P. DiNapoli, that modifies an existing program that permits public employers in the short term to contribute less into pension funds, though they would be required to put money into reserve funds once deferred payments are eventually made.

Still, Ms. Miner was not impressed.

"It is another way to kick the can down the road," she said. "It will have no appreciable impact on the oncoming fiscal crisis facing our cities and, in fact, will add to the crisis in the end."

The governor and the mayor have not met since his budget was introduced in late January and Ms. Miner spoke out. But Ms. Miner has not been punished for her outspokenness; she has remained in her leadership role with the state party.

Asked about Ms. Miner's critiques, Matthew Wing, a spokesman for the governor, said only that Mr. Cuomo "has enacted more mandate relief for local governments and schools than any administration in decades."

Ms. Miner's rhetoric and public criticism of the governor have raised questions about her ambitions. But she says she was simply seeking to attract attention to the fiscal woes of cities like her own.

"This is not some brilliant political strategy," Ms. Miner said during a recent interview in her office. "Just the contrary. This was, 'I am the mayor and I represent the people of this city and I need to make sure that their interests are heard and being represented.' "

That Ms. Miner, 42, would clash with Mr. Cuomo has an interesting wrinkle; she cut her political teeth as a regional representative for Mr. Cuomo's father, former Gov. Mario M. Cuomo. She later served on Syracuse's Common Council — where she earned a pugnacious reputation, in part for clashing with fellow Democrats — before being elected Syracuse's first female mayor in 2009. (Her mayoral portrait in City Hall is the sole color photograph on a wall of black-and-white pictures of the city's former mayors.)

Elected during a recession, Ms. Miner cut the city's work force by 10 percent. But she is still facing a substantial budget shortfall as she prepares for the city's 2013-14 fiscal year, which begins in July.

As a labor lawyer, she says she knew something about pensions before taking office, but she admits to having become alarmed by the extent of Syracuse's problems as well by bankruptcies

in other cities nationwide. “Cities are different in what causes them to go under, but the same systemic problems are there,” she said.

One of her tutors in economic issues was Mr. Ravitch, whom Ms. Miner said she “stalked” for information. Mr. Ravitch said he was skeptical whether he could help. “I said, ‘You need money more than ideas, and I can’t help with the former,’ ” he said.

But he was impressed by Ms. Miner’s persistence and honesty about the looming pension costs for cities. “She’s trying to be responsible about it,” he said.

[Kristi Andersen](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, a professor of political science at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University, said Ms. Miner’s positions have played well in her hometown, particularly after Lt. Gov. [Robert J. Duffy](#) <sup>[7]</sup> suggested — shortly after Ms. Miner’s initial critique — that [maybe the city should look into a financial control board](#) <sup>[8]</sup> as a solution to its fiscal woes.

“That was really not liked by everyone around here,” Ms. Andersen said. “There was a lot of rallying around the mayor.”

For her part, Ms. Miner said Mr. Cuomo was “an effective advocate on a number of issues that impact upstate and impact New York in general,” as well as perhaps the only figure who “has the skill and the political capital and the ability to bring all of the vested interests around the table.”

She said she knew the governor would not be happy with her remarks.

“But you know, my job is not to do things to get a positive reaction from state leadership: My job is to represent the people of the city of Syracuse,” she said. “And I anticipated, and have since received, tremendous positive feedback.”

A central New York native, Ms. Miner graduated from Syracuse University before beginning to work for the elder Mr. Cuomo in the early 1990s. She is married, has no children, and keeps a busy schedule of community events. She is a runner, and a jazz and rock fan.

She is facing voters in the fall for a second term, but has often found herself on the road to discuss the issues facing cities. She was on the way back from one such conference when she boarded the flight from Newark.

And while she survived that scare, Ms. Miner said it was something of an eye-opener.

“All of the sudden,” she said, “it put it in all in perspective.”

---

**Source URL:** <http://nyconstitution.org/press-clip/news-coverage/pensions/new-york-times-criticism-cuomo-over-plight-cities-raises-syracuse->

**Links:**

[1] [http://nyconstitution.org/press-clip-author/Jesse McKinley](http://nyconstitution.org/press-clip-author/Jesse%20McKinley)

[2] <http://nyconstitution.org/press-clip-author>

[3] [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/02/nyregion/for-syracuse-mayor-stephanie-a-miner-criticism-of-cuomo-raises-profile.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/02/nyregion/for-syracuse-mayor-stephanie-a-miner-criticism-of-cuomo-raises-profile.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

- [4] [http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/c/andrew\\_m\\_cuomo/index.html?inline=nyt-per](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/c/andrew_m_cuomo/index.html?inline=nyt-per)
- [5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/14/opinion/new-york-states-cities-cant-borrow-their-way-to-solvency.html?smid=pl-share>
- [6] <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/andersen/>
- [7] [http://www.governor.ny.gov/sl2/ltgovernor\\_bio](http://www.governor.ny.gov/sl2/ltgovernor_bio)
- [8] <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/24/nyregion/syracuses-mayor-miner-irritates-cuomo-over-state-aid-to-cities.html>