

News Coverage on EffectiveNY

Cuomo Takes Media Heat on Transparency Issue

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Governor Cuomo began his term in office promising that he would run one of the most transparent and open governments in state history. But, eighteen months into his term, news stories relating to Governor Cuomo's perceived lack of transparency in government have proliferated.

Most recently, the Albany Times Union reported that Cuomo administration officials had purged records from the state archives from Cuomo's time as Attorney General. The files related to the so called Troopergate scandal, and a scathing report written by then -AG Cuomo, condemning behavior by top staff of former Governor Eliot Spitzer and exonerating then Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno.

The paper's charges prompted a 1300 word angry letter from Cuomo's communications director, accusing paper of manufacturing a story to "rehabilitate" its own image.

The New York Times, a recipient of a 2200 word letter from the same Cuomo communications official on another topic, posted a story that detailed what it said was Cuomo's "self-editing" of his Attorney General papers.

The AP reported that the governor's staff was extremely slow to answer Freedom of Information requests, telling the wire service it was still looking for a video response from the governor at the annual media dinner over two months after the event took place.

The reports came amid news, in a NY Daily News article, that Cuomo and his top staff use an untraceable e-mail service on their Blackberries to communicate.

By the end of the week, several major newspapers printed scathing editorials in their Sunday editions calling the governor secretive and controlling. And the Albany newsweekly Metroland was comparing him to Richard Nixon.

Sue Lerner, with Common Cause, says there's a way to remedy some of the negative news stories on Cuomo. She says state officials should all agree to one standard for release of papers through the state archives.

"We don't believe that every single scrap of paper should be immediately available to the press and the public," Lerner said.

And she says it's OK to seal records for a number of years, so that a politician's adversaries can't use the files against them for political purposes. But Lerner says each official should not be making up new rules every time papers are donated to the state archives, or worse, arbitrarily changing the rules in the middle of a press inquiry.

"It's completely unfair to change the rules in the middle of the game, as was done to several reporters in the past few months," Lerner said.

She says Common Cause is working on a proposal to develop fair guidelines for the release of an official's public papers.

Polls show that Cuomo continues to be popular with New Yorkers, who are pleased with the governor's track record for getting things done. The most recent Quinnipiac University poll measured the governor's approval rating at 73%.

Bill Samuels, the founder of the New Roosevelt Initiative, credits Cuomo with accomplishments like enacting same sex marriage and closing a multibillion dollar budget gap after years of profound dysfunction in Albany. But he says those agreements were crafted mostly in secret, in private one on one meetings with legislative leaders. He says he sees the governor's methods as a "serious" problem.

"By getting things done in the old way, he's establishing a culture that may be working now," said Samuels, who says in the long run though, "it is not a reform culture" .

Samuels' father ran for governor in the 1970's with Governor Cuomo's father Mario Cuomo as his running mate. Samuels says Cuomo needs to learn how to accept criticism and not shoot the messenger.

"When we criticize , he should not take it as disloyalty," Samuels said.

Samuels says the Governor has chance to change the narrative. Cuomo has said he intends to launch a new effort for campaign finance reform, and Samuels says he could hold public

hearings and create an open process to develop legislation, as well as setting a good example on his own, by saying he won't accept any more corporate donations.

"Show us, do something," Samuels urged.

Cuomo's aides did not offer comment on the spate of negative news stories and editorials regarding the governor's alleged lack of transparency.

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