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Opinion Editorial on Budget

Mr. Cuomo's Low-Buzz Budget

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Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York presented an extra-lean state budget this week, his third conservative spending plan since taking office in 2011. The total outlays for fiscal year 2013-14, including federal funds to rebuild after Hurricane Sandy, will be almost \$143 billion. The budget contains some real bonuses, including a plan to raise the minimum wage and a proposal for a workable database for gun ownership. But it could also raise the debt load, especially in struggling upstate areas.

The budget, which must be approved by the Legislature before April 1, increases state spending by less than 2 percent statewide. That is admirable restraint, but the budget is not free of Albany's traditional sleight-of-hand, like one-time cash infusions. For instance, the governor would dip into reserves for the state insurance fund, although he does say that the money will go mainly to capital projects, not daily expenses. And since the state is nearing a debt limit imposed in 2000, the governor wants to free the State University of New York to issue more of its own debt in the future.

One of the more questionable aspects of the budget is a provision labeled the "Stable Rate Pension Contribution Option." Innocent as that sounds, the provision would give local communities the freedom to stretch out their pension obligations to the state by paying less now, and almost certainly more later on. The mayor of Syracuse, Stephanie Miner, describes this as "kicking the can down the road."

State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli would have to approve this idea, a decision he should

consider carefully. Communities like Syracuse pay pension costs into the state's \$150 billion pension fund, and lower contributions from these communities could make the state plan more vulnerable.

Besides, most of these cities need more help than this revision to the pension plan. Many are struggling with the 2 percent property tax cap Mr. Cuomo and the Legislature imposed in 2011, and there has been little relief from state mandates. Nor does this budget offer these communities anything new in the way of unrestricted state assistance.

There are other questions for legislators to consider, but by Albany standards this is mostly a low-trauma budget that will need only a few fixes.

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