

No Members, No Meetings For Cuomo's Consolidation Taskforce [Updated]

By Jon Lentz – City Hall

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Whenever it gets fully staffed, Gov. Andrew Cuomo's commission to make state government more accountable and more efficient may want to take a close look at itself.

The Spending and Government Efficiency Commission, or SAGE Commission, was authorized by executive order in January to devise a way to scale back the number of state agencies and root out inefficiencies.

However, the 20-member task force laid out in Cuomo's first few days in office has yet to meet, and only a handful of members have been named.

Instead, Paul Francis, the governor's director of agency redesign and efficiency and the commission's co-chair, has been carrying out some of its work behind the scenes.

The commission was slated to include two Democratic and two Republican lawmakers, one from each house, but only Republicans Greg Ball, a state senator, and Assembly Member Jane Corwin have been named so far.

In January, Cuomo called for prominent business leaders to spearhead the group, to make use of their private-sector experience in finding cost-cutting solutions, but none have been appointed.

Ball and Corwin have heard nothing from the governor since their appointments in January, despite a tentative May 1 deadline to turn in a set of recommendations that target overlapping state agencies. Cuomo also called for a reorganization plan to be on his desk in six months, or in early June, while a final report is due by June 2012.

The commission, which aims to reduce by 20 percent the state's more than 1,000 agencies, offices, bureaus, advisory panels, commissions and public authorities, was authorized as part of last month's budget deal. Ball, for one, was eager to get started.

"I think it was important to get SAGE placed in the budget as part of negotiations, and now that that's done, I would hope to see that we'd move forward aggressively and do something publicly," said Ball, who was recommended for the commission by Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos. "My only fear is that there would be limited input and I wouldn't want such an important decision to be a foregone conclusion."

Ball said he had read reports that Francis was working with the governor and the budget office to consolidate operations, adding that he wanted the decision-making process to be more open and transparent.

"I'm certainly extremely interested in cutting the size of New York State government, because it's grown too large and unwieldy," Ball said. "That's why I would like to see input from the taxpayers, the business community and rank-and-file government officials, as to where the 20 percent should come from."

Cuomo's newly approved budget has already merged several agencies, at least some with Francis' help. The insurance and banking departments were merged into a new Department of Financial Services, and the correctional services and parole departments were combined into the new Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. Along with several other consolidations, the changes are projected to save more than \$50 million this fiscal year.

It is unclear if these consolidations will count toward the 20 percent reduction target. Joshua Vlasto, a Cuomo spokesperson, said the commission needed to be authorized before beginning its work.

"The commission was just authorized in the budget so it only became law two weeks ago and wasn't going to proceed without law," Vlasto said.

A commitment to scale back and simplify New York's labyrinth of government agencies and authorities was a key piece of Cuomo's platform during his run for governor. The governor's work toward getting an on-time budget and his focus on other priorities such as ethics reform, a property tax cap and regional economic development councils may be delaying the creation of a full-fledged task force.

Public-sector unions, whose workers could be affected by reorganization, expressed concern about the governor's emphasis on filling the task force with people in business.

"You hear that kind of nonsense all the time, and the old canard that government should run more like a business, well that's sort of absurd if you come right down to it," said Stephen Madarasz, a spokesperson for New York's Civil Service Employees Association. "Government is not a business."

Madarasz added that he isn't opposed to the streamlining effort, and that he'll await the details before making a final judgment.

The Public Employees Federation doesn't necessarily oppose consolidation either, said spokesperson Darcy Wells. In fact, the union wants to see fewer public authorities, and would like a seat at the table when the task force is formed.

Kathryn Wylde, president of the Partnership for New York City, said she was optimistic that the task force would address the concerns of unions as well as other stakeholders.

"Anybody who looks at how Governor Cuomo has approached structural issues will know that he is going to be inclusive, that the SAGE Commission project has to have buy-in from a whole range of interests," she said. "I think he's demonstrated that he will take an inclusive approach."