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Midday Magazine

## Sen. Michelle Hinchey previews New York state legislative session WAMC Northeast Public Radio | By Ian Pickus

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the Agriculture Committee.

Published December 28, 2021 at 6:37 AM EST



members of the Senate and Assembly about their expectations for 2022. It will be Governor Kathy Hochul's first budget process, and it comes during an election year. First-term Democratic Senator Michelle Hinchey represents the 46th district and chairs

You must have an interesting perspective on life in the legislature because you took

over and then we immediately were in a state of emergency with the pandemic. So

With the new legislative session fast approaching in Albany, we're speaking with

how would you characterize your term so far? Yeah, you know, it's definitely been an interesting time to start any new position, but especially one in the legislature, you know, this, this position is so based on relationships, both with my colleagues to be able to really fight to get things done for our region, and for the state of New York, but also with our constituents, right, and people who live in our communities to really have an ear on the ground to talk with them

directly, see where they are, and be able to fight for the things that will make their lives

better. So some of that is been hampered with the pandemic. But I think we've been

able to do a really good job still of reaching out, being present, being available, and understanding the issues to be able to fight for them in Albany and make sure that communities like ours in upstate New York, more rural New York, small cities, are reflected in the conversation. And even though it's been a different year, it's been a really productive year, so far. How did the pandemic change what the priorities of your district are? Because I have to imagine you had to reorient to a new set of demands once the pandemic took hold. Yeah, even running the campaign, we were in the process of petitioning when everything shut down. So we shifted our whole campaign to being COVID response entity, for, quite frankly, a really long time, you know, I was out volunteering at local food banks and food pantries, because, for me, the point of getting into public service is to help people. And when better to do that, when more important to do that, then in the middle of a pandemic, one in which we've never seen for generations, many of us have never seen

that really helped frame the priorities that I brought to session earlier this year. I was talking about infrastructure, investment and broadband, we knew that was an

issue, but that the pandemic elevated that issue so fundamentally. If you are living in a

community without internet access, you know, you're being left behind, you know that

Schooling our kids from home, from a health perspective, right? If we're telling

you are struggling, and that there's not equity in the way that you can approach your life.

But so many more people saw that too, and we saw it from the point of education, right?

especially our seniors to not come into hospitals or their doctor's appointments, and to

before. And so I spent a lot of time in the early parts of 2020 being on the ground, and

use telehealth. Many of our seniors live alone, and already the barriers to that technology are high. But if you live in a rural area, our seniors weren't even able to do that and to stay safe. And then from an economic development perspective, working from home, starting a business from home, shifting your entire life, to being there. And so, broadband was just one example of something that we knew was something we wanted to tackle and really elevate in the state legislature. But the pandemic really kind of helped elevate it for us, but just showed how foundationally difficult this situation was and we needed to really fight for it. And I'm proud to say that that we did, we still have a long way to go. But we've definitely done a lot of things this past session, including get finally fighting for household level mapping data to be included in a study. But you know, access to food too is one of the reasons why I'm incredibly proud and honored to chair the Agriculture Committee. You know, our farmers are struggling. But we also saw how fragile and quite frankly, broken our food supply chains are in our food supply is. We had farmers dumping milk and produce quite literally dying on the vine,

while hundreds and thousands of people were lining up down the block either standing

on street corners or in car parades, trying to find out where their next meal would come

from lining up at food banks and food pantries. And so it really I think, also helped put

the need for better access to locally sourced healthy food front and center in the

conversation and that's been something both that we've elevated and have been

session

working to elevate this year and something we'll continue to fight for going into next

A few days ago, you joined an event with the U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. Are you getting, and are farmers in your district getting, what they need from the federal government right now in terms of helping to stabilize some of the price fluctuations and other challenges you just mentioned? New York farmers, the New York farms that we have, are very different than the farms that we see in the Netflix documentaries, and the ones that are getting the federal subsidies. Our farms are small to midsize family farms. Most of the federal assistance historically have gone to the bigger factory farms in the Midwest and in other places of our country. Our farms have been completely left out of that, right. We've got great champions like Congressman Delgado fighting at the federal level to make sure that our farms are front and center in that conversation. Senator Schumer is doing the same.

But we have a long way to go to make sure that it's our farms that are really being

recognized. And quite frankly, and as, were able to hit the goals of the CLTPA tomorrow,

and every other state and every other country did as well, we've still done irreparable

California on fire, and the Midwest facing even more severe droughts. Those are our

major agricultural producers in our country.

prices and production.

cheaper.

damage to our planet. And so within the next 20 years, we will continue to see the effects of that, we will continue to see Florida underwater, we will continue to see

And what that means is that food production really comes back to the Northeast, the Northeast becomes the breadbasket of the country once again. And that really means New York. So we have to be doing everything we can right now today, to be making sure that our farms can stay in business, to be helping them with costs, and to be making sure that we can get expanding their markets, right, and making sure that we can get their farm fresh food into communities that need it. Because if we don't act on that now, in 20 years from now, we're going to be looking backward, saying, wow, we really missed the boat, and we no longer have direct access to healthy locally produced food. I think we all remember what happened when the boat got stuck in the Panama Canal right? We've seen what happens when we are so foundationally dependent on an international supply chain, we have to make sure that we are looking out for New Yorkers here. And we have the food production, but we're losing our farmers because of the increased costs, because of the lack of support that they've gotten for decades. So we're really focused again, going into next session, to do everything we can to help expand markets to relieve some of the financial burdens and to make sure that our farmers are able to stay in business.

we think, next year about whether farm workers should meet a threshold to receive

overtime payment on many of these farms. What's your view on that? I mean, that

seems like a key cog in what you're talking about in terms of the balance between

Yeah, it's part of it. Listen, if farms had the money to be able to pay workers overtime,

they would be doing it. We have failed agriculture. Because as you said, they don't set

go and buy that produce, buy that food from another market somewhere where it's

as well as our friends and labor to really come up with a solution that works for

they can actually turn a profit. Many of our farms in New York are not, right, you have the average age of a farmer, depending on where you're looking in the state between 55 and 62. And many of their kids, many young people don't want to go into that scale of farming because they see their parents don't have any money for retirement. Right, all of the money goes back into the farm. So we are looking and that's again, why we're so focused this year, to really have some serious investment in New York agriculture, because we have to make sure that we are valuing our food supply and our food

production, and that we can get them the funds they need to stay in business to not

close and be pressured by development. And so many of our farms, I mean, just look

So we have to do everything we can to make sure that they can stay in business. And

around upstate New York, we're losing farms by the day due to development pressures.

then we can continue to make sure that some of those costs that they have will change

everybody. We have to make sure that our farms are viable, that they can survive, and

and increase, but we really have to make sure that they're viable. Let me go to another area. I want to circle back to your earlier discussion of expanding broadband. We've done a lot of stories here about what you're talking about, which is that huge stretches of places like Greene County and Columbia County and many others. For many years, it was clear that maybe their street had the ability to get broadband, but not every household. So there was a severe undercount of the amount of broadband wireless accessibility for people. How close are we to getting everybody on high speed internet now as we head into 2022? You know, after this year, I believe we are a lot closer, you know, the way that the PSC has been tracking access to the Internet data has been through census tracts and through exactly what you just described. That's the reason why certain households,

especially ones that live across the street from people with internet, are counted as

having it, because they're in a census tract. And if that census tract is covered, we

assume that all those houses are covered; we know that this is not true. So what

successful in securing, was directing the PSC to do accurate household level mapping,

households are covered, which is the number that is often touted, but that significantly less than 98% have reliable access to high speed data, or high speed internet. So that

something that we fought for in the budget this past March, and that we were

a mapping study to collect the data so that we can show that in fact, not 98% of

study should be underway.

and the cost of last mile build is pretty, pretty high. But we've been working on legislation that will help that including a bill that I sponsored this past year with Assemblymember Carrie Woerner to make the cost of building out that last mile less expensive for independent broadband providers, which are the ones who are building out in more rural areas. So it's been a focus of ours. We're definitely many steps closer with the household mapping data study that's in the works right now. And we'll continue to fight to make sure that every household as soon as possible gets access to access to the internet. Let me turn to a different utility. You've been in the headlines in recent days over an ongoing battle to nail down a better bill processing system from Central Hudson for consumers. Can you explain what the problem is and what you're trying to address? Absolutely, you know, Central Hudson and utility companies in general estimate bills. Now what Central Hudson is doing is they're basically estimating every other bill, it used

But unfortunately, what Central Hudson and utility companies have done is they still

check the meter every other month, and the month that they don't check the meter,

communities that I represent, especially here in Kingston, but we're seeing it across the

normally, and they're being charged \$500. We have a basically a net zero business that

was being charged \$35. Their bill went up to \$5,000 in that estimated billing cycle. We

there's an estimated billing that they send you. And what we're seeing across

state is that these estimations are incredibly high. Someone's bill could be \$35,

have homes where people were using usually around \$100, they're being charged \$325. We have no understanding of how Central Hudson has gotten that estimation, because their estimation formula is proprietary data. And so what's happening is many people who are seeing these astronomical influxes in their bill are unable to pay that right, especially people who are on auto pay who budget for what they believe their bill is going to be may all of a sudden see an overdraft charge when their bill went from \$100 to \$400, causing them increased debt, increased fees. And the good thing is, yes, the next month when their meter is read, if that money, if that

I think we'll see. You know, I know everybody wants to, we all work a lot better and more efficiently when we can be in person and have conversations and be together to discuss the issues that we're facing at hand. But we also really need to keep everybody safe, right? And we're seeing these numbers skyrocket right now. Personally for me, I've never known more people to have COVID than I do today. And so we have to make sure that we're keeping people safe. So I know that leadership and members of the Senate are really monitoring the numbers, and we'll see what it looks like as we get closer to January. Are you satisfied with the job that Governor Kathy Hochul is doing so far on the pandemic? You know, I think she's in a tough place, but I think she's doing a great job, you know, we definitely need better access to testing. We have to make sure as we're seeing these spikes, that our communities have access to testing, especially our upstate communities. But in general, I think she's been coming forward with a pretty clear and

York State have not been updated since the 1970s. And we have two bills to make sure that we can buy, both state agencies, organizations and nonprofits, can buy more food from New York farms, and one of them too creates the first in the nation equity and sustainability framework for municipal food contracts. It's good food purchasing. And it allows agencies to be able to buy food from someone who is at 10% more expensive

colleagues are really to helping and supporting upstate New York and more rural areas. You know, I represent the most rural districts in our conference. And when we talk about things like broadband, when we talk about things like water infrastructure, access to clean water, which is a major issue in our small municipalities, right now, with the aging infrastructure, much of our infrastructure in upstate New York is 100 to 200 years old. We just passed the Green Amendment, a constitutional amendment, which is the right of all New Yorkers to clean air, clean water and a healthful environment. We now have to make sure we are delivering on that and that we are helping municipalities upgrade and fix their aging water infrastructure so that everyone across

New York State has access to clean water. You know, these are issues that maybe

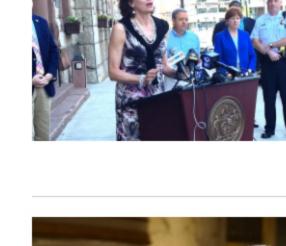
wouldn't work. through some other areas, specifically, New York City, but other densely

populated areas in the state. And everybody's coming to the table when we raise how

important these things are. Everybody is really interested to learn more about it. They're interested to be a partner, they're interested to help. And it's been really great agriculture being a key part of that, you know, it can be often seen as an upstate issue. But no matter where you are, you should be eating healthy foods. And we need to be supporting our farmers. And one thing that I'm really excited about in that space, which could really set New York as a leader on this path, is the space of industrialized hemp. We have a bill that we just put forward at the new bill going into this session that directs the new Office of Cannabis management to put together real regulations and guidelines to have all packaging. Cannabis packaging is accurate, that industry gets up and running to be created with hemp. That is a win for everyone across our state. It helps kickstart a

company in France that's creating car dashboards with hemp, a biodegradable product. We want to be leading that here in New York. So we're starting with the cannabis industry that we've seen in other states. A lot of single-use plastics increases a solid waste issue. We're looking to mitigate that before it even starts and really kickstarting the industrial hemp industry so that we can lead the way in more biodegradable climate smart manufacturing practices. And if we're doing that, along if we're using hemp for those products, along with using healthy soil practices to sequester carbon, there's a world in New York that we could be making carbon negative products. That's incredibly exciting, and a really big space of innovation that New York can lead the way on and so I'm excited about that. And I know a lot of my colleagues are too. Michelle Hinchey News

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A lifelong resident of the Capital Region, Ian joined WAMC in late 2008 and became news director in 2013. He began working on Morning Edition and has produced The Capitol Connection, Congressional

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an MA in English, both from the University at Albany, where he has taught journalism since 2013.

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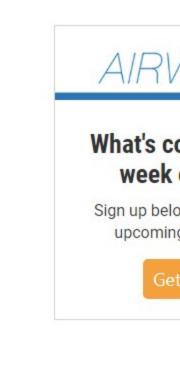
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We are hoping that there's a broader outreach too. One of the issues is that you had to be able to access either internet to start to complete that study. So we have called on the PSC, my office and many of my colleagues, we led a call to say that there needs to be a phone number, there needs to be a mailing done, so that everyone whether you have access to the internet or not, that's the point of this study, can fill out the survey, can get the information to the PCE so that we can put a real plan to build out internet to be that they would go out and read the meter, and you get billed for two months at a time with a more accurate reading. The PSC directed utilities to do billing every month.

bill was overestimated, they will get that money back. However, the upfront costs many of our families cannot sustain. So our bill basically says no longer can you have six months of estimated billing, we've dropped that number down to three. And we directed the PSC to undertake a comprehensive review of the billing procedures used by all utility corporations in New York, and to facilitate and formulate a new estimation formula that is transparent. And that we can understand and quite frankly, probably more accurately base on previous usage. We know that our communities and our families are really struggling, we're seeing costs rise everywhere right now, especially in our heating and cooling bills. And we have to make sure that we are not overcharging people, especially money that they do not owe. Do you expect that it'll be an in person session next year, given the fact that the pandemic seems to be reaching a sort of dangerous, new phase?

decisive view of making sure we're keeping everybody safe. And we'll continue to see how that goes. Are you expecting state government to work any differently this year than it did under Andrew Cuomo for the past decade? You know, one thing I will say is that the new administration is definitely more collaborative. I can say a couple of examples of that, you know, we've been working, obviously, I chair the Agriculture Committee. And, as I mentioned, we are doing a big push to make sure that we are investing heavily in agriculture this year to make sure that everybody again, no matter where you live, who you are, what your background has

access to locally sourced, healthy, nutritious food, it's so profoundly important. And

we've reached out to their offices, and we've had a lot of really exciting, interesting

conversations about support for what we're working on. And, you know, we've got a

couple of bills, I'll mention a couple of our priorities going into next year, specifically in

this space, updating our procurement laws. You know, our procurement laws in New

than the lowest responsible bidder, if they are taking into account one of the seven

everything from racial equity, to nutrition, animal welfare, good climate stewardship

practices, you know, we want to make sure that everyone is eating New York-based

different ways, and they've definitely been collaborative and receptive. And I think that is

healthy food. And we've been working with the governor's office in a lot of these

values based procurement options that we have listed out in the bill. And that's

a new moment and a welcome one to say, government. Is there one thing that surprised you about being in the state Senate that you didn't realize when you were running for the job? You know, I think one thing that surprised me early on was, how open all of my

market that, quite frankly, doesn't exist anywhere right now. And hemp can really help us remove plastics from our world. We're already seeing it, it's helping with paper. There's a

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