



The 26 Billion Dollar Man

Oswego's Own **Tim Gilchrist '79** Guides New York's Economic Recovery

BY MICHELE REED

Room 246 of the New York State Capitol building in Albany — the former lieutenant governor's office — is firmly rooted in its Victorian past, from the coffered wood ceilings to the traditional blue carpeting. A polished oak staircase, its newel posts carved with intricate leaves, leads to a gallery lined with law books.

But Room 246 is also a launching pad for the state's future. It is the front line in the fight against recession. This is the headquarters of the state's Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Cabinet, chaired by **Timothy J. Gilchrist '79**.

Here on the hearth of a 19th-century gray stone fireplace sits a carry-on bag, ready for a flight to Buffalo or New York City, and nearby, employees work at modern cabinets and desks, a fax machine and a copier.

Maps cover every available surface, some with sticky notes indicating projects. In the North Country: a bridge replacement, \$4.1 million. In the Finger Lakes: clean water project, \$1.5 million. In New York City: financing for an affordable housing complex for seniors, \$7.2 million.

Alongside leather-bound law books sit white plastic binders, stuffed with proposals from county and local governments — some hundreds of pages thick. And there on Gilchrist's bookshelf, near a model construction vehicle, is the heart of it all: a

"It's not only important that it's a good project. What's important is that it's a project that puts people to work."

blue binder holding the federal Economic Recovery Act, all 407 pages of it.

With billions of dollars to spend, and only months to do it in, the clock is ticking for New York's stimulus czar.

Gilchrist isn't wasting a minute of that time.

One warm sunny day in April, he starts his day early, with a quick breakfast at his desk, heated in the office microwave. Popping a seltzer, he settles in to work,

checking messages that came in while he was working at his New York City office the day before.

If he gets a few minutes of quiet time, he may spend it reading proposals or digesting the recovery act itself, which for weeks was still being written by Congress.

Soon the day will erupt: The BlackBerry at his hip will start buzzing, local government officials will be knocking on his door, Gov. David Paterson will be looking for a briefing.

A Big Job

Gilchrist's job is daunting. There is more than \$26 billion to spend, and nearly \$400 million of it in just 120 days.

But the payoff is huge: a potential 215,000 jobs saved or created in New York state, behind only California and Texas, according to White House estimates.

Many of the programs being considered were already in the pipeline, or at least in some stage of planning, before the stimulus package was even approved.

"Organizations have to have procedures in place to get projects out" within the time frame, says Gilchrist, the governor's senior advisor for infrastructure and transportation, noting the requirement for "shovel-ready" projects.

The feds set tight deadlines. Gilchrist and his team had to literally begin making plans and allocating money while they were reading the regulations for the first time.

Gilchrist is very clear on his main mission, however: creating jobs for New Yorkers.

“It’s not only important that it’s a good project,” he says. “What’s important is that it’s a project that puts people to work.”

One of his prime considerations is how many people a given project will employ.

Gilchrist works with municipalities and county governments to help them generate their proposals for the stimulus funds.

“We try to put the information into a useful basis and effectively get it out,” he explains.

Making use of effective communication technologies is key to the cabinet’s success.

Gilchrist and his team started their outreach in December as word of the planned stimulus package broke. They created a Web site “on the fly.”

The stimulus package was signed by President Barack Obama Feb. 17. Gov. Paterson had formed the Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Cabinet a week earlier, Feb. 10. Since then, Gilchrist has gone all around the state, hosting sessions with local officials. He has met with representatives of counties, mayors of cities and villages, town officials.

Members of the governor’s staff have a weekly phone call with New York’s Congressional delegation. Gilchrist testified before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

In April, Gilchrist met with Joe Biden when the vice president hosted two people from each state to discuss the stimulus effort. He attended the Business Roundtable and the June meeting on the high-speed rail network.

“What I am seeing is unprecedented transparency and accountability,” Gilchrist says of the Obama administration’s approach to the recovery effort.

Throughout this summer, Gilchrist and his team will continue working to get the information out, evaluate projects and make decisions on how the money will be spent.

The first \$392 million in highway funding had to be spent by July 1 but

TIMOTHY J. GILCHRIST '79

Career Highlights

March 2007 to present:

Deputy Secretary of Economic Development and Infrastructure in the New York Governor’s Office

Oversees major economic development, infrastructure and transportation agencies or authorities. Project sites include Ground Zero, Tappan Zee Bridge and Moynihan Station.

February 1980 to March 2007

New York State Department of Transportation

March 2006 to March 2007:

Chief of Transportation Strategy

November 2005 to March 2006:

Director of Downstate Transportation Strategy

June 1998 to November 2005:

Director of Planning and Strategy

July 1995 to June 1998:

Director of Passenger Transportation Division

May 1994 to July 1995:

Director of Transit Division

August 1992 to May 1994:

Dedicated Fund Coordinator

Negotiated an agreement with the state Legislature to set up an accounting program for the Thruway Authority, which then sold its first bonds.

June 1992:

Master’s in Public Administration, Harvard University

April 1990 to July 1991:

Assistant to the Commissioner

August 1988 to April 1990:

Director of Transportation Budgeting Bureau

January 1987 to August 1988:

Chief Budgeting Analyst

Gilchrist and team accomplished it by May 29, a full month ahead of schedule. A total of \$1.1 billion must be allocated by February 2010.

New York’s effort is being scrutinized, even as it is going on. The state was one of 16 chosen by the federal General Accounting Office’s accountability office for ongoing review.

Gilchrist’s group must prepare bimonthly reports, and a cadre of GAO staffers is on hand, devoted to looking over the shoulders of the state team.

But all this oversight is a positive thing, Gilchrist says.

“It’s good to see. People are rallying around this.”

The level of cooperation and communications from the federal government is “better than I’ve ever seen in 30 years [in state service],” Gilchrist notes.

Approximately \$140 billion worth of project ideas were proposed for the \$4.2 billion New York expects to receive in Recovery Act infrastructure and energy funding.

And while the decisions must be made at warp speed, Gilchrist needs to keep his eye on the long term. “We have to keep looking a few months, a few weeks down the road.” They must be ready to justify every decision and measure it against federal benchmarks.

Every day is a hotbed of activity. “We have to triage every morning what to do. We have to handle the political expectations, but we also realize most people you talk to aren’t going to get what they want,” Gilchrist says.

A Career in Public Service

Making decisions on infrastructure and transportation is nothing new for Gilchrist, who is a veteran of nearly three decades of state service, spending his entire career in the transportation field.

He joined state government after seeing a civil service test advertised on a bulletin board at Oswego State during his senior year.

“The reason I’ve been able to stay in the transportation field for 27 years is that it is so varied,” he says. “I’ve had several careers there.”

He also managed to put his economics and geography dual major to good use.

First he spent 10 years in the budget field, with the opportunity to work on high-profile assignments that gave him exposure on a higher level.

He earned a master's at Harvard in 1992, and in 1994, he became director of the Transit Division, where he oversaw a grantmaking program that spends \$2 billion per year for transit systems like the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

He became head of planning and strategy, making statewide policies and working on the state's Master Plan.



Timothy J. Gilchrist '79 carries the 407-page Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Gilchrist's career mirrors the history of events in the state. He handled a lot of border issues with Ontario and Quebec after the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA in 1994. Later, he would work on revitalization of the World Trade Center site after 9/11.

He has been active in downstate strategic planning, including overseeing the Metropolitan Planning Organization.

That position combined everything he has been working on during his career: chief of strategy for finance, transit and planning.

In March 2007 Gilchrist was appointed by then-Gov. Eliot Spitzer to Deputy Secretary of Economic Development and Infrastructure, with 16 agencies reporting to him. Paterson asked him to stay on, until in February of this year, realizing how much attention needed to



Timothy J. Gilchrist '79 reports on projects at a meeting in New York's stimulus "war room."

be paid to the Economic Recovery Act, the governor created a cabinet and asked Gilchrist to chair it.

Affecting People's Lives

Gilchrist is enthusiastic about his work in transportation and infrastructure.

"You really have an impact on the daily lives of citizens," he says. "You can see things you've worked on. That's why I've stayed."

The last time he was in Oswego, he saw wind turbines piled up at the Port of Oswego, and felt good that his work helped make the effort to use alternative energy — and the resultant economic growth — possible.

Gilchrist is encouraged about how moving to a new, greener economy can help grow industry and jobs in New York state. He points out that General Electric has relocated a renewable energy business from another state to Schenectady bringing high paying technical assistance jobs.

Gilchrist laughs that his interest in infrastructure and transportation may very well date back to his Oswego days. He recalls the Blizzard of 1977 when snow removal equipment was so taxed it broke down. He was among the college students hired at Wine Creek Apartments to shovel the snow.

Oswego professors would fuel his interest in economics and geography, especially the late Professor Emeritus of Geography Girgis Ghobrial. "I will remember him forever," says Gilchrist. "I learned more about the world from him." Ghobrial taught Gilchrist how geography affects every economy and culture. The lessons he learned in the "Geography of the Middle East" class stay with him to this day, as he watches the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unfold on the evening news.

Even now, he keeps an *Industrial Location* book from an Oswego course on the bookshelf in his Capitol office.

Though his work is "chaotic," Gilchrist calls it "satisfying."

"Every day is an adventure . . . something is going to happen," he says with a laugh. And for all the chaos, this dedicated public servant is enthusiastic and positive as he looks to the future of New York state's economic recovery.

"We have a well-educated, well-trained and reliable workforce; our educational system, especially SUNY . . . provides the training."

He will continue to meet the challenges of his role in implementing the Economic Recovery Act with care, diligence and a bit of humor. ●