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Cuomo ratchets up tax cap pressure

Gov. will be calling you to sell his plan

By Joseph Spector
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ALBANY — Gov. Andrew Cuomo is continuing to put pressure on lawmakers to adopt a property tax

cap as the sides work toward an agreement. Cuomo is starting an automated phone message to New Yorkers next week urging them to contact their lawmakers to back

the tax cap — a top priority for the first-year Democratic governor. The call is being sponsored by the state Democratic Committee. “Many politicians are against the cap because it limits their power, and they are fiercely lobbying the Albany legislature against it,” Cuomo urges in the message, the text of which was obtained Friday by Gannett’s Albany Bureau.

“You can help get the tax cap passed by speaking out.” Cuomo on Friday indicated that legislative leaders are aiming for a compromise on a tax cap, saying he’s hopeful an agreement can be reached before the legislative session ends June 20.



Cuomo

“We now have parties who are open to discussion, and I believe we are going to get there,” Cuomo said on Talk 1300-AM in Albany. Cuomo has sought a strict 2 percent cap on the growth in property taxes, saying New York can no longer sustain having among the highest

taxes in the nation. In recent days, Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos, R-Nassau County, said he’s willing to reach a compromise with Cuomo and the Assembly. He had previously said he wouldn’t negotiate after Senate Republicans in January passed Cuomo’s tax cap bill.

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THE DACHA PROJECT

A place to live and learn



Four members of the Dacha Project, Marina Gershon, Danila Apasov, Lea Elleseff and Lily Gershon, talk about building their communal homestead in the unfinished part of the common house. AARON MUNZER / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Homestead’s focus on sustainable, communal living

By Aaron Munzer
Correspondent

FREEVILLE — In front of a video camera, Joe Fisher and Danila Apasov are stomping on and leaping against a bale of straw they’re trying to wedge into the wall of the first structure built on their land. “Straw bale (construction) is good for aggression,” Fisher says, as he punches a bale into place. It’s tough, dusty work. But with the video camera around, it seems more like fun, as their friend Lea Elleseff narrates and the other two take viewers on a whimsical tour of the building process, from the sweaty work of digging the drainage ditch to walloping bales to compress them into the walls of the sustainable, low-impact building.

When it’s all done, Elleseff congratulates them. “Purdy as pie,” she says. In other early videos, the six members of the Dacha Project — a sustainable, educational homestead started by six young adults three years ago — explore gravel tamping, explain how to plant fall garlic and discuss the best way to convert a car to run on biodiesel. The other three members are Lily Gershon, Marina Gershon and Sharon Zetter.

Learn as you go
Two years later, four members of the Dacha Project sit around their communal kitchen table, drinking hot herbal tea as the winter sunlight streams through their large, passive solar windows and heats their earth-bermed liv-

ON THE WEB
For more information on the Dacha Project, visit www.dachaproject.com or www.dachaproject.com/blog

ing space. Although it’s cold and raining outside, it’s room temperature inside, and the wood stove hasn’t been on for days. It’s their second building, their first home, and a monumental achievement for them, considering that all but one of them had no building experience three years ago. “At first it was hard for anyone, even us, to imagine that we could do this,” Apasov says, smiling. “Now, two and a half years later, we’ve had some successes, and we’ve proven that we can build a house.”

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New Roots spreads to State Theatre

School to add senior class

By Rachel Stern
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New Roots Charter School is expanding — both in grade levels and space. The school announced Friday that the board of trustees approved a lease agreement to rent space in the State Theatre in Ithaca. A senior year program will be housed in the new space. In addition, the school will use the theater for practices, performances and programming during the school day. “We are absolutely thrilled because the location and synergy of the building are ideal,” said New Roots Principal Tina Nilsen-Hodges. “We also look forward to supporting the historic State Theatre, so it is a great win-win situation for both organizations.”

On the second floor of

the theater there is unused office space that the school will convert into classrooms, she said. The old box office on the first floor also will be used as classroom space. The charter school started two years ago with grades 9 and 10. At the beginning of this school year an 11th grade was added. The school had reached capacity at the Clinton House, which is on North Cayuga Street a block away from the State Theatre, and was looking for space for the new senior class at the beginning of this year, Nilsen-Hodges said. The school’s new senior year program will be a transitional one, she said, and feature about 35 students. The program will emphasize college coursework, internships, year-long projects focusing on community sustainability and development of an online digital portfolio for college application purposes.

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New Roots Charter School 11th-grade students Ezra Davis, foreground, and Jonathan Seaman, back left, show third-grade students the worms in their composting system recently. SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTO

Toxic flame retardants found in 80% of baby products

By Liz Szabo
Gannett

Eighty percent of baby products contain toxic or untested chemical flame retardants, according to a new study of products such as car seats, changing pads and portable cribs.

One-third of products, which also included nursing pillows, contained a chemical called chlorinated tris, which was removed from children’s pajamas in the 1970s because of cancer concerns, though the chemical was never banned, says a study released Wednesday in Environmental Science & Technology.

The Environmental Protection Agency has said there is a “moderate level of concern” about links between tris and cancer, developmental problems, reproductive problems and other health concerns. The Consumer Product

Safety Commission also has found that tris “may pose a significant health risk,” spokesman Scott Wolfson says. Another flame retardant, called TCEP, was found in 10 of the nursing pillows tested. California lists TCEP as a carcinogen.

Toddlers have levels of flame retardants in their bodies three times higher than adults, says Sonya Lunder, a scientist with the Environmental Working Group. That’s partly because kids spend so much time on the floor, where chemicals can accumulate in household

dust, and because they frequently put their fingers in their mouths, the study says. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has found flame retardants in the bodies of 90 percent of Americans.

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A quick and easy vegetable garden
How to plan and plant the most basic vegetable garden with little time and effort.
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Homestead

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It was while volunteering on organic farms on Hawaii's Big Island that the four Russian-born members met Joe Fisher, a sustainable builder who convinced them it would be possible to build their own house together.

Their desire to stay together as friends — and the buying power and labor possibilities of six people — were so convincing that they made a pact to start a life and a home together.

"We'd gone on a lot of trips together, and spent a lot of time sharing space, and we realized that there was no way any of us could do this project individually," Apasov says.

That family has gotten closer as of last summer, when Apasov and Elleseff were married beside their garden, further cementing the ties of Dacha friendship.

The name comes from a Russian word, *dacha*, a small, backwoods cabin Russian families would use to get away from city life for the summer months. That same need to flee led the group of friends to Ithaca to find a better way to live, away from suburban New Jersey upbringings and expectations they didn't agree with.

Originally they had planned to settle in the Adirondacks, but the bitter cold convinced them to look a little farther south. They found Ithaca on a visit to explore EcoVillage and immediately fell in love with their 16-acre parcel on Bone Plain Road in Freeville.

"We were already calling it our land when we looked at it," Marina Gershon says.

Help from friends

Once they moved to the land, they quickly started on their projects, putting up their communal home, tool shed, and tending to a 70-tree orchard, vegetable garden and pond. But even with all six of them it wouldn't have been possible without the help of other friends, neighbors and interns interested in learning with the Dacha.

"You wouldn't want to do this work by yourself," says Elleseff, who works at the Sciencenter.

Very quickly, they say, it became not only about learning for themselves, but teaching others in return.

They've held workshops in growing shiitake mushrooms and edible weeds, held work parties, and offered their communal space for others to hold classes in everything from art to music to medic training.

Because they pool their resources when buying tools, materials and other land-related expenses, af-



The exterior of the Dacha Project in Freeville, a sustainable, educational homestead where young adults live and work. AARON MUNZER / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

ter little more than two years of payments they have only two months left on their mortgage, and everything else has been paid for out of pocket.

"Here we share a lot," Elleseff says. "The way to do that is by pooling your resources. It's challenging, but it's also hugely rewarding."

For some members, the shared space was the only reason to ever embark on such an endeavor.

"I would have never bought a home by myself and submitted to a mortgage by myself," Lily Gershon says. "By sharing something, you create a home base with your friends. That becomes an alternative family."

With their shared resources, they've purchased solar panels that provide them with enough electricity to power their computers, phones and a small refrigerator. They heat with a wood stove in the winter, although the passive solar house is so efficient they don't use the stove that much. For both pumping and heating water, they use an old diesel generator that they hope to convert to use biodiesel soon.

An emphasis of the project has been on using recycled materials whenever possible, so everything from roof boards to rice cookers has been refurbished and reused.

Apasov, who works in video editing at Cornell University, says he hopes to inspire other "young, poor" people to do something together to make the best use of their resources.

Escape to country

In part, their migration to the woods of Freeville was a reaction to suburban New Jersey upbringings and unfulfilled city living.

"I came from Philly, and I wanted to live out in the country where I could grow my own food, lower my impact, and at the same time have this huge space for community, arts, writing, and building," Elleseff says. "It's not just a place to live. It's about what we're building here, and it's just great to be a part of it."

For Marina Gershon, their transplanted neighborhood is already more friendly than the one they

grew up in.

"It's refreshing as a change from New Jersey suburbia, where you go outside, you do not know your neighbors, and they're right next to you," she says.

Apasov says it's their inexperience, coming from a different sort of cultural living, that has often been most helpful for them when learning new things.

"It helps that a lot of us don't have experience doing things, so whenever we hear about new ways of doing things, we're like, 'Sure, we'll try that,'" he says.

In that spirit, they have lots of projects still on their to-do list: a sauna, barn, studio and workshop.

Their neighbors have watched the Dacha grow with pleasure, happy to give them good advice or loan a hand tool.

"As I had similar ideas back in my younger days about doing a cooperative group effort in an agrarian context, I was pleased that they were moving in, and thought it was a great idea," said Linn McMannis, who runs nearby Earthwalk Farm with his wife, Suzanne, and sells vegetables to the Dacha members.

"Of course, being an older person, I was aware of the pitfalls that lay ahead of them. I thought there were going to be difficulties, but they overcame them as time went on."

He says he's impressed with their interest in teaching others what they have learned.

"They're already doing seminars, and that's impressive," McMannis said. "It's something society needs: instruction on how to go back to a simpler, sustainable way of life."

Compromise required

Although members say there's some strife in their day-to-day communal living, it's like any committed relationship,

or any other group of friends: It takes compromise and commitment.

"It's sort of like being married to five people," laughs Elleseff, as she reconsiders. "Maybe you shouldn't print that."

But Elleseff says because they all have such a shared history and common purpose, most disagreements work out in the end.

"The way I've begun to view these things is that technically there is a combination of circumstances that will satisfy most everyone," she says.

Apasov, however, says they've already laid down some unofficial ground rules.

"We have an agreement that no one will cut down the forest or build a house without consulting each other," he says, smiling.

As he's recently tapped their maple grove to cook down a season's worth of syrup, you get the feeling they're not thinking of cutting down the forest any time soon.

Products

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The chemicals are an inexpensive way for manufacturers to comply with California's strict fire safety standard, Lunder says. Because California is such a large market, many manufacturers design all their products to comply with its standards. Companies aren't required to label products containing flame retardants, Lunder says.

Others say the new study may overstate the risks.

"Flame retardants are well-studied and provide important fire safety benefits in homes, cars and public areas," the American Chemistry Council, an industry group, says in a statement. Manufacturers' "dual objectives" are to use "the safest possible chemistry to protect fam-

ilies by preventing fires from starting and limiting the spread of fires once ignited."

Gordon Nelson, a professor of chemistry at the Florida Institute of Technology, notes that some of the baby products tested were purchased in 2002, before a common type of flame retardant was phased out. That chemical, PentaBDE, is no longer used in new products.

Baby products might appear safer if researchers were to test only products currently sold in stores, Nelson says.

Four brands — BabyLuxe Organic, Baby Bjorn, Orbit Baby and Boppy — say their products meet California's standards without chemical flame retardants, according to a buyer's guide issued with the study.

New Roots

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Seniors will not just be in the theater, she added. Students may go to the Clinton House to use new science labs for example, Nilsen-Hodges said.

"It is a campus model where they will use the theater as a home base," she said. "It is not only in close proximity to the rest of our school, but it is ideally suited for our purposes."

Doug Levine, executive director of the State Theatre, said this is a great opportunity for the State to put unused space to good use. While the theater usually has 70 to 80 shows a year, there are many nights when it goes unused.

"We are excited to help out young minds," Levine said. "To know that underutilized space will be better used makes us feel really good."

Both Nilsen-Hodges and Levine said the lease agreement is standard downtown rental prices.

Levine said he did not want to comment further on the price.

The lease term is 60 months, with two five-year options to renew for New Roots, Nilsen-Hodges said. The cost per square foot to New Roots ranges from \$7 per square foot for basement storage space to \$18 per square foot for space used exclusively for classrooms, she said.

The lease is subject to review and approval by the Charter Schools Institute, Nilsen-Hodges said.

Peter McWain will serve as the lead teacher and administrator for the senior year program. McWain led the development of a New Visions program for sustainable community development in Broome County during the 2009-2010 school year, according to a statement from the school.

"Really, this is a tale of two organizations that both had needs and it is really a way of helping both organizations out," Levine said. "It just made sense."