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A watch list for Twin Tiers issues in '07 *Staff (Editorial)*

The coming year in the Twin Tiers is full of opportunities for communities and governments to improve the quality of life, grow the economy, spend taxpayer's money more efficiently and protect the public investment in education.

With that in mind, here are some of the major issues the Opinion page plans to follow in 2007:

* Health care: The New York State Department of Health could find itself refereeing merger talks between St. Joseph's Hospital and Arnot Ogden Medical Center in Elmira. That depends on whether St. Joseph's succeeds with its current suit to block a health commission recommendation for such talks. If not, the Health Department's choice of a mediator in the discussions will be crucial in trying to accomplish what previous attempts have not. At stake is the cost and future of hospital health care in Chemung County.

* Education: Dust will be flying in several school districts that approved capital improvement bonding this year. The Elmira \$100 million effort is by far the largest and will involve shuffling some students to temporary sites as the district upgrades its aging buildings. Beyond the bricks and mortar, the most innovative program to watch unfold is the Chemung County **School Readiness Project**, announced this year and poised to kick into higher gear in 2007, as a way to ensure that at-risk children get help in their pre-school years. State test scores, especially in middle school math and English, continued their weak trend in 2006 and in 2007 will reveal whether educators have reversed the decline.

* Transportation: Sometime in 2007, probably toward the fall, Interstate 86 will complete one of its most ambitious projects since the Corning bypass — the Horseheads bypass that will speed traffic through the village on a newly opened raised highway. It will alleviate traffic jams and tame an intersection that had long been one of the most accident-prone in Chemung County.

* Public safety: After the murder of State Trooper Andrew J. Sperr and the wounding of Trooper Sean Brown in Chemung County this year, law enforcement officers must be given the resources and systems necessary to protect them. Both incidents happened during what seemed, for the troopers, to be roadside checks. The state already has earmarked more powerful service pistols for troopers, and communications policies have changed to ensure troopers radio in their whereabouts during stops. But the shootings in Chemung County show just how dangerous a trooper's job can be.

* Elmira's downtown: What was supposed to be the year of the scaffold was not. Except for massive renovations at New York Sport and Fitness on West Water Street, there was little visible activity in upgrading the city's central business district. Elmira Downtown Development, the agency responsible for improving the business climate, did another great job of running the weekly farmers market at Wisner Park, but little else. With some \$400,000 in state grants for downtown, EDD is facing a use-it-or-lose-it year to start spending the money.

* Local government: The Elmira City Council is up for a historic election, switching from two-year terms to four and obligating voters to be careful whom they choose. With the city facing a \$2.1 million budget deficit, Elmira officials are under the gun to enact recommendations by a special task force and demonstrate to taxpayers that the city can recover from its current financial mess.

At the Chemung County level, a proposal to share highway services among the county and a group of towns will be a demonstration project for the rest of the county as to how inter-government cooperation can reign in taxes. Meanwhile, as county officials decide whether to allow Casella Waste Management to dump more refuse in the county landfill, they will need to ensure ample public comment before voting on the request.

* Economic development: The Sikorsky Hawk Works @ Schweizer Aircraft project is scheduled to be up and going with more than 100 new jobs involved in the final construction phases of Black Hawk and Naval Hawk helicopters. Manufacturing jobs like these are a necessary balance to the influx of lower-paying retail jobs that will follow the arrival of the new Kohl's, Circuit City and Wal-Mart Supercenter going up at the former A&P plant site in the town of Horseheads.

* State government: New York Gov.-elect Eliot Spitzer comes into the job with a reform-mindedness he established in two terms as attorney general. In the wake of the Alan Hevesi scandal, conspiracy charges against a New York City state senator and an FBI investigation of Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, Spitzer should seize the moment, build public support and push through more ethics and lobbying reforms in state government.

* Recreation: The Chemung River coalition among the city of Elmira and the towns of Big Flats, Elmira, Southport and Ashland should begin to bear fruit for outdoors enthusiasts. Hopefully, officials will begin to lay plans that would one day lead to a trail system paralleling portions of the river for walkers, hikers and bikers.

Meanwhile, one huge piece of unfinished business must be completed in 2007, and that is the Catharine Valley Trail between Horseheads and Watkins Glen. The state's inability to fund this project has cost Chemung and Schuyler counties untold losses in tourist traffic and dollars. State Sen. George H. Winner Jr. has said he wants to see the job, now years behind schedule, finished possibly with special-member money that might come through his office. How sweet that would be.

So there's the list, just for starters. We'll be watching. Readers should too. It is a team effort that gets things done.