

TIMES UNION

New research role for top Cuomo aide

Malatras takes over as leader of Rockefeller Institute

By Casey Seiler

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Albany — Last month, Jim Malatras managed a sprawling complex of state agencies employing hundreds of thousands. On Monday, he assumed the presidency of an academic research institute with a staff of roughly three dozen.

Malatras, 39, recently stepped down as Gov. Andrew Cuomo's state operations director to take over leadership of the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government. Formerly attached to the University at Albany, the think tank now serves the full 64-campus SUNY system from an elegant State Street brownstone across from Washington Park.

After nearly a decade in service to Cuomo, he now looks forward to "being a conduit ... helping us communicate smart research to policymakers, to legislators, to Executive Chamber employees, to agencies, to other states looking at New York."

That was the original intent of the Albany-based think tank, he noted. "We've lost some of that connectivity between RIG and our public policy and our governmental stakeholders," Malatras said. "I'm here to re-establish some of those connections."

He also wants to bring more top-notch scholars into RIG's work, expand the scope of its inquiries and identify new sources of funding.

"Part of it is to give RIG a little more swagger — because we are doing things here that

are second to none," he said, ticking off recent work on public pensions, Obamacare implementation and more that has garnered national attention.

Former state Assemblyman Richard Brodsky, a member of RIG advisory board who first saw Malatras rise in his office from intern to legislative director, called the new job a perfect fit.

"Jim will be able to focus and broaden Rockefeller's work," he said, "consistent with its decades of success working on evidence-based public policy ... in an era when we seem to be headed nationally in exactly the opposite direction."

The Westchester Democrat brushed off the idea that Malatras will have to dispel fears of the institute ending up as the governor's pet think tank. At the same time, he argued for the value of better ties between policy researchers and the elected officials who could put their ideas into practice.

"Will the outcomes of professional academic research be tilted to coincide with the governor's wishes? The answer to that is no," said Brodsky, currently a senior fellow at the progressive think tank Demos. "If the question is, 'Will the governor's policy interests be reflected in the work of the institute?,' the answer is 'I hope so.'"

"I think the work will speak for itself," Malatras said, "and then people can make their own decisions about whether we've become a tool of the governor or not."

Outgoing SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher, who was Malatras' boss during his

year-long break from Executive Chamber service spanning 2013 and 2014, said in a statement that she was “thrilled that we are welcoming three-time SUNY alum Dr. Jim Malatras back to SUNY.”

Malatras, who has a 4-year-old son and a second child due in May, holds a Ph.D. in public policy from UAlbany. His 2008 dissertation, “A Tale of Two Movements: Collective Legal Consciousness,” examined the evolution of the grassroots campaigns to shut down the Indian Point nuclear plant. Cuomo, a longtime critic of the plant due to its age and proximity to New York City, only last month struck a deal to shutter the facility by 2021.

Malatras, whose position as president was created for him, will receive an annual salary of \$290,000. His most recent salary in the Executive Chamber was \$183,761, according to the public payroll database SeeThroughNY.com.

The Rockefeller Institute’s director Tom Gais, its previously top-ranked administrator, made \$185,040 in 2016, according to the same website. Gais will maintain his title and focus on overseeing RIG’s research, Malatras said.

Malatras, long viewed as one of the governor’s most trusted aides, was among the half-dozen members of the administration whose actions were the subject of last spring’s federal subpoena into upstate development projects. Cuomo’s former Executive Deputy Secretary Joe Percoco was the only one from that list to face federal charges in the eventual criminal complaint, which didn’t include a whisper of allegations against Malatras.

He earned qualified plaudits last June from what might be the toughest audience for a Cuomo staffer: a group of Hoosick Falls residents who, after attending a Capitol protest, were admitted to Malatras’ office to discuss the state’s response to the PFOA contamination crisis. The administration announced last week that Jamie Rubin, Cuomo’s former Commissioner of Homes and Community Renewal, would replace Malatras as state operations director. Rubin played instrumental roles in state and federal recovery projects related to the damage wrought by storms Sandy, Irene and Lee.