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PROTECTING OUR ELECTIONS

This year's elections were conducted under unprecedented conditions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A series of emergency Executive Orders from the Governor changed election dates and deadlines multiple times. Newly instituted procedures for absentee balloting meant an historic number of absentee ballots were being cast. Polling places that might normally be available, for example at nursing homes and senior facilities, were not available this year.

Although the Board of Legislators does not have authority over how the Board of Elections conducts elections, we wanted to make sure we were providing as much assistance as possible so that Westchester voters had confidence that their votes were properly counted.

Our new Election Information Gathering Task Force, convened after voting issues during the June 23 primary elections gathered information from



more than 150 public comments and from committee meetings with voter advocates and the Westchester County Board of Elections Commissioners.

The Task Force report, issued in August, recommended that the Board of Elections pursue a range of improvements including: expanded early

voting hours; a multimedia campaign to encourage early voting; multi-lingual video instructions for how to vote absentee; changes in procedures to increase the number of available workers; drop boxes for returning absentee ballots; and information-sharing partnerships with community organizations. ■

Westchester County Board of Legislators NEWS

Voice of the People of Westchester County for over 300 years

Fall 2020 Newsletter



Colin D. Smith

District 1 ~ Cortlandt, Peekskill, Yorktown



Dear Friends and Neighbors,

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused deep personal loss, economic instability and dislocation across the County. At the Board of Legislators, we continue to work daily to respond to the crisis.

Westchester was one of the country's first COVID-19 hotspots. Working together with County Executive George Latimer, our County health department, and federal, state, local officials, the County was able to scale up testing, expand hospital capacity, make safety changes to our bus system, provide personal protective equipment to medical personnel, and enforce health and safety measures such as requiring masks and social distancing.

To help mitigate the financial impact to taxpayers, we moved quickly to enact a range of property tax relief measures -- extending the deadlines for taxpayers facing COVID-19 related hardship and slashing late payment penalties for every other property taxpayer during this crisis.

Because of our budget discipline last year, we had leeway in this emergency to respond rapidly to the dramatic loss of County revenue resulting from the pandemic -- including reallocating \$10 million that had been earmarked for the County's rainy day fund, and reducing spending by at least \$11 million by bonding for certiorari repayments and annual pension contribution costs.

At the Board, our investments in upgraded information technology have allowed us to work continuously without interruption for the people of this County. We have not missed a single Board meeting.

But our work is not done.

Public health and mental health services remain crucially important. We need to continue to support programs to provide for residents facing food insecurity. We must prepare for challenges Westchester families and businesses will face when moratoriums on evictions are lifted. And soon we will begin debating a 2021 budget that will be deeply challenging. We remain committed to ensuring that we provide the support that Westchester residents and businesses need during the pandemic with the fiscal responsibility that Westchester taxpayers deserve.

Sincerely,



Peekskill Police Captain Astrologo's Retirement Celebration



Peekskill Middle School's Saturday Academy



Supporting Our Hudson Valle Hospital Center Nurses

SUPPORTING POLICE REFORM

The first half of 2020 saw us dealing with another crisis -- responding to the calls for police reform sparked by the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minnesota.

At the Board of Legislators, we felt we had a moral imperative to raise our voices. In a letter to officials in Minneapolis, I was proud to sign along with all of my colleagues, we urged justice for Mr. Floyd.

When our State Legislators began consideration of police reform bills in Albany, I also joined 15 of my colleagues in a letter, urging changes to a law that shielded police disciplinary records from public scrutiny.

The repeal of that law and other police reform measures were passed by our State Legislators and signed into law by Governor Cuomo in June. These historic reforms -- which include a ban on chokeholds by law enforcement officers, a prohibition on false race-based 911 reports, and the designation of the Attorney General as an independent prosecutor for matters relating to the civilian deaths -- are the first steps in a process to ensure that all the actions we take in policing and public safety are fair and equitable.

County Executive George Latimer has



Getting Ready to Tour Westchester Correctional Facility

also convened a Westchester County Police Reform and Reimagining Task Force to examine police practices and training in Westchester County. Legislators Terry Clements, Colin Smith and Damon Maher serve on the Task Force. The Task Force will develop a plan to reinvent and modernize police strategies and programs

based on community input, in accordance with an Executive Order from Governor Cuomo.

Recommendations from the Task Force are expected to be before the Board of Legislators for our review and for public comment and approval by the beginning of the new year. ■

PROTECTING OUR ENVIRONMENT

This year we've made major advances in creating a sustainable future for Westchester's environment.

FOOD SCRAP RECYCLING: This year we approved plans for a dramatic, expanded food scrap recycling program for Westchester County. Food scraps are one of the biggest components of the material sent to landfills. Instead of discarding them, by recycling them into useful compost, or converting them to energy, we can reduce greenhouse gases and saving money on trash disposal for our local municipalities.

Municipalities are now able to join in a new County-sponsored program, which will collect and transport food scraps to our private partner for composting. The procedure is designed to minimize the number of truck trips,

reducing the environmental cost of the program. And the financial cost with be lower than the cost of garbage disposal for nearly all Westchester's municipalities. In addition, the State Department of Environmental Conservation is offering grants that will cover up to 50% of the startup investment in things like sealed bins that prevent leakage for municipalities looking to begin food scrap collection.

The project also includes construction of a food scrap recovery and information center at the County's Household Material Recovery Facility in Valhalla.

With this exciting new program, I hope Westchester will be able to lead the way for other counties in New York and across the nation.

ELECTRIC VEHICLES: We've also

worked this year to encourage the use of electric vehicles and to prepare our mass transit system for a cleaner, electric future.

We approved a plan to replace more than 100 Bee-Line diesel buses with new, hybrid electric ones.

We also approved the installation of a new charging station and two all-electric buses as we prepare for a move to even cleaner bus fleet.

And for residents driving electric vehicles, we approved the installation of public-use electric vehicle charging stations in County parking facilities to make cleaner cars more accessible and help reduce carbon emissions throughout the County. Look for more spots throughout County parking facilities and lots where you can pull up and plug in! ■

RESTORING OUR ROADS AND BRIDGES

We have continued the work of restoring roads and bridges throughout the County after years of neglect.

Although Westchester faces difficult financial circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic, making capital improvements now, when interest rates are historically low, is a smart investment in Westchester's future.

This year we've approved County road and bridge restoration projects for major thoroughfares across Westchester -- from Louisa St., North Division St. and Charles Point Ave. in Peekskill; to Palmer and Tuckahoe Road in Yonkers; from the Boston Post Rd. Bridge in Rye to Westchester Avenue in White Plains; from Lincoln Avenue in Pelham to Willett Avenue in Port

Chester to Hardscrabble Road in North Salem. We approved the replacements of the bridge over the Croton River on Butlerville Road in Somers and a crucial stretch of Westchester Avenue in Port Chester.

As we move forward with our recovery from the pandemic, we must ensure that we build back on a strong foundation of 21st century infrastructure. ■

IMPROVING OUR PARKS

Our award-winning County park system has proven more valuable than ever this year. With so many people working from home and attending school remotely, our parks have been essential resource for the mental and physical health of County residents. I want to thank our Parks Department staff for the amazing job they've done, keeping our parks and beaches and pools open and operating safely.

Over the past few years, the Board of Legislators has stepped up our com-

mitment to the County parks -- investing in major improvements and upgrades. That commitment has continued in 2020.

This year we approved a long overdue plan for renovations at Mohanic Golf Course in Yorktown Heights, approved infrastructure repairs to Hilltop Hanover Farm & Environmental Center in Yorktown; and approved projects for the Kensico Dam Plaza in Valhalla.

Although Playland was not able to open this season because of the pandemic, our commitment to its repair

and restoration continues. We approve around \$6 million worth of crucial structural renovation to the tower, the buildings that house the food concessions to ensure a bright future for this historic jewel in the crown of Westchester's park system.

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PROBING STORM RESPONSE BY UTILITY COMPANIES

Local power and telecommunications companies faced the challenge of dealing with a major weather event, when Tropical Storm Isaias ripped through Westchester in August. Unfortunately, preparations and response by the companies once again proved inadequate.

In September, we brought representatives of Con Edison, New York State Electric and Gas and Altice before us in appearances before meetings of the Committee of the Whole. Verizon declined to

attend, citing a pending investigation by the New York State Public Service Commission. We found the company's response inadequate and will be working to bring them before us to face the concerns of their customers.

Since we held the last round of such meetings -- after winter storms Riley and Quinn in 2018 -- we have seen some areas of improvement, but too many of the same problems remain, leaving people in the dark for a week at time, again and

again. Continuing problems include the over-reliance on mutual assistance, inadequate in-house resources and personnel, and woeful communications. The companies seem to treat large state fines after the fact as merely the cost of doing business.

Things must change and we will continue to press the companies, and the New York State Public Service Commission, which has regulatory authority over the companies, until things DO change. ■



Grand Opening of Hudson Valley Legal Services in Peekskill



Grand Opening of Virtual Reality Arcade at Jefferson Valley Mall