



Assemblyman

Steve Otis



Community Update

Winter 2013

Dear Friends,

As we come to the close of my first year working with you as your representative in the State Assembly, I am writing to update you on some key issues and to invite your suggestions for 2014.

I have focused my work on addressing issues of importance to Westchester communities, such as property tax relief, increases in state aid for our school districts, economic development and assisting small businesses.

I have also worked closely with local officials on the distinct issues that each community faces. As a former Mayor, I am able to provide special insight and advice to local leaders and help their communities achieve their goals. In addition to my advocacy on these matters in Albany, I have sponsored and co-sponsored a variety of bills and new laws to address statewide and local concerns. I have also been active on issues relating to the environment, Long Island Sound, emergency management and flood mitigation.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of representing you in the State Assembly. For me, every issue brings excitement and the opportunity to use my experience to address the concerns we all face in Westchester. Please contact me with your ideas on state issues or legislation.

Best wishes to you and your family in this holiday season and for a happy and healthy New Year.

Warm regards,

State Aid Increases to Sound Shore School Districts

I am pleased to report that through the budget process, all of the school districts in the 91st Assembly District received important increases in state aid this year. The Sound Shore School Districts of Port Chester, Blind Brook, Rye, Rye Neck, Mamaroneck and New Rochelle received increases above what had been the pattern in recent years and above what had been proposed in January.

Advocating for more state aid for Westchester school districts was a major priority of mine this year. State aid reduces pressure on property taxpayers and protects important staff positions in our school districts. As always, the entire Westchester Delegation pushed

hard for fair treatment of suburban school districts.

The adopted state budget includes a statewide increase of \$936.6 million in aid to school districts that was accomplished by prioritizing education spending. Westchester's 40 school districts will receive an increase of over \$39 million, about \$11 million more than proposed in the executive budget in January. Typically, aid was increased through additions in foundation aid, high tax aid, and GAP restoration aid. The additions were negotiated with the support of Governor Cuomo as part of the budget process.

Improved State Oversight of Utility Storm Preparedness

Westchester communities, especially along the Long Island Sound shore, have been battered in recent years by severe storms and damage from flooding. Throughout the state, a major issue has been the ability of utility companies to respond to storm damage and restore service to residential and business customers.

Following Superstorm Sandy, Governor Cuomo established a number of state commissions to improve the way New York prepares for and responds to natural disasters. In January, I testified before the Moreland Act Commission that was established to review utility company accountability in these storms.

Emergency preparedness has been a major priority of mine going back to the late 1990's and as a member of the Westchester County Flood Action Task Force from 2007 to 2010. The trend with utility companies around the country has been to reduce workforce and increase reliance on mutual aid from utility companies in other regions to respond to major storms. In the last 15 years, we have had numerous storms in Westchester where utility service was out for three or more days. This is unacceptable.

I am pleased to report that in the 2013-14 state budget we

enacted reforms to improve NYS Public Service Commission oversight and authority over utility companies in relation to emergency preparedness and response.

The PSC will now be able to provide a more comprehensive review of utility planning and performance. It can now recover tough civil penalties for violating state law, regulations, or PSC orders. Utilities are now required to adopt more comprehensive emergency preparedness planning and oversight and must certify annually that they comply with state laws and requirements. The PSC has new powers to review, direct, fine, modify or revoke a utility company's certificate to operate based upon compliance with storm preparedness standards and performance.

These are important improvements governing utility company storm capabilities. I serve on the Assembly Committee on Corporations, Commissions and Public Authorities and will continue to follow issues of storm preparedness and the role of the PSC in ensuring that New York utility companies properly prepare for weather and other emergencies.



As part of the Long Island Sound Bi-State Caucus, Assemblyman Otis participated in an important meeting of New York and Connecticut legislators and policy experts to discuss the coordination of state environmental policies to benefit Long Island Sound.

Common Core and Education Forum Held in Port Chester



Assemblyman Otis hosting the education forum at the Port Chester Middle School that allowed parents, teachers and residents to express their concerns to the State Education Commissioner and members of the Board of Regents.

On Monday, October 28th, I hosted a public forum on the Common Core and related education issues. The purpose of the forum was to give parents, educators and administrators throughout Westchester County a chance to share their concerns with state education officials regarding Common Core implementation, testing and other matters of importance to our students and school districts. NYS Board of Regents Chancellor Merryl Tisch, Harry Phillips, a Westchester member of the Board of Regents, and NYS Education Commissioner John King attended the forum, which was held at the Port Chester Middle School.

More than 70 individuals had the opportunity to voice their concerns, questions and suggestions directly to Commissioner King and the Board of Regents. While their comments tracked many of the concerns expressed earlier in the year by legislators, parents and educators, new details were also raised. I remain concerned about the over-reliance on high-stakes testing, especially when the rollout of new teaching methods has not been fully implemented, nor adequately vetted and shared with school districts.

I also have significant concerns about the compilation, sharing and security of student school records and personal information. I co-sponsored legislation, which passed the Assembly in 2013, to ad-

dress student privacy and record security issues. Great care must be taken to ensure that sensitive student information be kept confidential in accordance with parent and school district wishes.

I have no doubt that the testing program has been advanced too quickly and that over-reliance on testing is diverting resources and classroom time away from teaching. In addition, the far-reaching impact of student privacy issues must be addressed. In today's society, the risk that record information can be stolen, hacked, accessed or misused in ways beyond our control is apparent. It is clear we live in a different world than we did just a few years ago. I will work for a change in the policies of the State Education Department and Board of Regents, or enactment of legislation if necessary, to see these issues addressed.

If you were unable to attend the Port Chester forum, a link to the video recording of the evening can be found on my website, <http://assembly.state.ny.us/mem/Steven-Otis>.

I will continue to press the issues raised at our Westchester forum. As always, I welcome your thoughts and concerns as we work together to ensure that our children have access to a quality education that will both instill a love of learning and prepare them for college and careers.

Important Reminder to Register for Basic STAR Exemption

In an effort to update its exemption records, the NYS Department of Taxation and Finance is requiring all homeowners receiving the Basic STAR exemption to register with the Department by December 31, 2013. Basic STAR is a state tax program, which exempts the first \$30,000 of a home's value from school property taxes. In order to qualify for the exemption, the property must be an owner-occupied, primary residence where the combined income of the resident owners (and spouses) is less than \$500,000.

All resident homeowners who wish receive the Basic STAR exemption for 2014 and future years must register by the December 31st deadline, *even if they have previously registered and received the STAR exemption in prior tax years.*

If you fail to make the December 31st deadline, the Department of Taxation and Finance is prepared to process late renewals for a limited period of time. Please contact them immediately at (518) 457-2036.

Homeowners have three options to register for Basic STAR: online, by telephone or by paper application. By now, all homeowners should have received a STAR code, which is necessary to register. If you do not have your STAR code, you can look it up online at www.tax.ny.gov/pit/property/star/index.htm, or by calling the Tax Department at the number listed above.

Property Tax and Mandate Relief

The need for property tax and mandate relief continues to be a pressing concern in Westchester County and throughout the state. I recently participated in a public forum on the topic sponsored by the League of Women Voters and the Local Summit of Larchmont/Mamaroneck. There is no question that property taxes in our state are too high. New York is unique among states in the amount and extent of services that are assigned to local property taxes. For this reason, I believe we need to control costs and reduce our reliance on property taxes to pay for services.

At the forum, I stressed the importance of focusing on larger mandate relief efforts that will bring meaningful relief to overstressed property taxpayers. Those measures would include shifting the local portion of Medicaid costs to the state. Again, New York is unique among states in charging a portion of Medicaid costs to the counties. I also support increased use of the STAR property tax relief program or other forms of state assistance, such as through the return of the middle class STAR rebate program or a property tax circuit breaker, to shift the burden away from the property tax. I also support efforts to cap pension costs for local governments and school districts so that these costs are not solely placed on the property tax. These efforts will provide noticeable property tax relief to area homeowners and make it more affordable for individuals and families to live in New York.

Small Business Conference Stresses the Importance of Buying Local

On October 16th at the Mamaroneck Town Center, I co-hosted a successful Small Business & Economic Development Forum with the Women's Enterprise Development Center (WEDC), which focused on strategies that encourage the idea of buying local and the benefits to the community from supporting local businesses.

A diverse audience of entrepreneurs, non-profit organizations and community representatives was present to hear from keynote speaker, Ajax Greene, Executive Director of ReThinkLocal (an organization he co-founded to raise awareness of the importance of localism and facilitate collaboration among local businesses for their mutual benefit). Acknowledging the price advantages that large, high volume stores can offer, Greene noted that for many customers – by some estimates 40% of all consumers -- price is not the sole determining factor in deciding where to make a purchase. Those consumers are motivated not merely by the bottom line, but also by societal, community and environmental values.

According to Greene, local companies need to share their values with customers and collaborate with each other to foster a culture of localism. Studies show that every dollar spent at a locally owned business will circulate some 300% more in the community before it leaves. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, Greene observed, a 10% shift in purchasing from national chains to local suppliers generated \$140 million in new revenues and 1800 new jobs. The National Association of Realtors has also reported that areas with vibrant, locally owned business communities have 54% higher property values than

otherwise comparable communities. And locally owned businesses, on average, donate more to support local community organizations than do other non-local firms.

I am glad that so many business and community leaders came out to hear Ajax Greene's powerful and inspiring presentation, and I hope that we will all do our part to support our local, independent businesses.



Assemblyman Otis at the Small Business forum with Anne Janiak, Executive Director of WEDC, and Ajax Greene, Executive Director of ReThinkLocal.

Otis Bill Extending Child Labor Protections is Signed into Law

Governor Cuomo has signed into law a bill I sponsored extending New York's child labor law protections to children working in the fashion industry. Previously, an anomaly in the law excluded underage models from the same protections afforded to other child performers, including actors and musicians. I worked closely with the advocacy group, Model Alliance, Senators Savino and Klein and other fashion industry representatives to address numerous instances of abuse and sexual exploitation of young workers.

Now, for the first time, child models will be adequately shielded from exploitation, abuse and unacceptable working conditions. The new law also affords underage models the same educational and financial protections given to other child performers.

Veteran Status Can Now Appear on NYS Driver's Licenses

New York State is home to more than 900,000 veterans and families who have served our nation and safeguarded our way of life. Earlier this year, a new law took effect that allows eligible veterans to have their military status designated on their NYS driver's license. Qualifying residents can have the word "Veteran" printed on the upper left corner of a newly issued (or renewed) license, learners permit or non-driver photo identification card at no additional charge.

These special licenses will make it a lot easier for veterans to show proof of their service, allowing them to take advantage of many programs, discounts and benefits that are afforded to our retired military personnel. Eligible veterans can apply for this status designation in person at the Department of Motor Vehicles or by mail. For more information, visit the DMV website at <http://www.dmv.ny.gov/armedforces.htm>.

Serving Others in Our Community

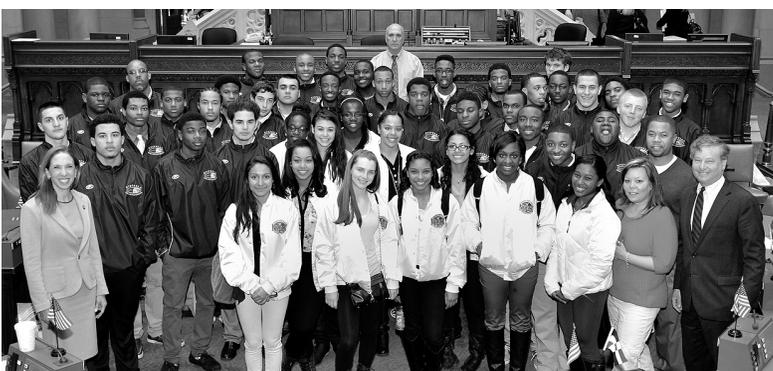
At this time of year, it is especially important to recognize and support the wonderful work of the many charitable organizations who serve the needs of those less fortunate in our community.

Recently, I had the pleasure of visiting the Holy Rosary Parish in Port Chester and seeing firsthand the many support services and programs they offer for at-risk youth, the homeless and the needy. For nearly 20 years, the Holy Rosary Church community has been devoted to serving the less fortunate, providing a wide array of programs for area residents including children, families and senior citizens.

Operating through its not-for-profit umbrella organization, Caritas of Port Chester, Holy Rosary runs a daily soup kitchen, a food pantry, providing twice weekly, bagged food provisions, and an open "clothes closet," distributing gently used clothing and shoes to

15,000 neighborhood residents each year. Caritas collaborates with other charitable organizations to provide the services of a licensed social worker, weekly immigration counseling, ESL classes, and a host of youth services. It also operates an emergency relief fund, providing critical emergency assistance to young mothers without health insurance, individuals in need of prescription medication for which they cannot pay, and those facing eviction or the cut-off of utilities.

Holy Rosary and Caritas rely extensively upon private donations to meet the needs of the many individuals and families they serve. For more information about the important work they do or to get involved with the organization, visit their website at www.caritasofportchester.org, and please reach out to other non-profits serving those in need throughout the Sound Shore.



Every school district in the Sound Shore has its share of exceptional athletes and athletic teams. In March, Assemblymembers Paulin and Otis welcomed to Albany representatives of the 2012 championship football and cheerleading teams of New Rochelle High School.

College Internships Available

Legislative Internships are available to college students in my district and Albany offices. Internship applications are now being accepted for the spring academic term and for the summer. If you would like to receive an internship description and

application, please contact my office at 939-7028.

Internships focus on legislative research, analysis of state issues and assisting constituents with problems they may be having with governmental agencies.



Assemblyman Otis attended the ribbon cutting of the Blythedale Children's Day Hospital and Early Childhood Center. Blythedale is NYS's only independent, specialty children's hospital dedicated to improving the health and quality of life of children with complex medical illnesses and conditions. The expanded center will greatly enhance care to those patients served in their day programs.



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Legislation Online

The text and status of bills, along with the sponsors' memos, are available online through the State Assembly website at www.assembly.state.ny.us. Copies of bills and supporting documents for legislation are also always available by contacting my District Office at 939-7028.

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