



Assemblyman

Steve Otis



Community Update

WINTER 2016

Dear Friends,

It is an honor and privilege to serve you in the State Assembly and to work with you on the wide variety of issues we face in Westchester. My goal, as always, is to be a productive legislator making progress on issues affecting schools, local governments, small businesses, not-for-profits, consumers and taxpayers. This newsletter highlights some of the issues where I have played a leadership role.

The Clean Water Grant program, which I initiated, continues to garner wide support from taxpayers, local governments, environmental groups and construction industry advocates across the state. Increasing funding for this successful program will be a priority for me in 2017.

A bill I sponsored to assist in the solving of missing persons cases was signed into law in July. Ideas for legislation come from a variety of sources, often as a result of problems or concerns that people bring to my attention. In this case, the idea for the legislation came from mystery writer, Jan Burke, who founded the not-for-profit Crime Lab Project, which advocates for better funding of crime labs and improvements in forensic science. Her research and work on missing persons issues identified the need for this legislation.

I hope that you will contact me with your ideas for legislation or on issues where I can be of assistance.

In this holiday season, I wish you and your family happiness and health in the New Year.

Warm regards,

Steven Otis
State Assemblyman

Broad Coalition Calls for Increase in State Water Grant Program Citing Massive Clean Water Infrastructure Needs

On November 16, 2016, a broad coalition of state and local officials, construction industry executives, union leaders and environmental advocates held a news conference at the Hommocks Conservation area in Mamaroneck to call attention to critically needed clean water infrastructure projects and to press for increased funding of New York's successful clean water infrastructure grant program, which I helped to create in 2015. These projects include necessary upgrades to wastewater and drinking water facilities, as well as the replacement of crumbling water pipes and culverts that are part of our aging underground infrastructure.

Local officials, including Mamaroneck Town Supervisor Nancy

Seligson and New Rochelle Mayor Noam Bramson, stressed that municipalities cannot afford to make these costly repairs, which can amount to millions of dollars, on their own. Construction Industry Council President Ross Pepe, a leader of the coalition, emphasized the jobs that will be created, while Senator George Latimer and Assemblywoman Shelley Mayer spoke of the importance of state assistance to help fund these projects.

In its first two years of operation, the clean water infrastructure grant program has enabled over \$1 billion in clean water projects to move forward in all parts of the state. The success of the program underscores the enormous need for state funds to make critical water quality projects more affordable for local governments and taxpayers. Continuation of the program is vital to creating new jobs, cleaning our environment and containing local property taxes.

Investing in clean water infrastructure projects will help to ensure that our wastewater is properly treated, our streams, rivers and the Long Island Sound are protected and our drinking water is safe to consume. The program has already received strong support from Governor Cuomo, Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie and both houses of the Legislature. I am working with all the advocates to increase and expand the Water Grant program in the 2017 legislative session.



Village of Mamaroneck Receives NYS Clean Water Grant

I am very pleased to report that the Village of Mamaroneck has been awarded a \$250,000 grant from the clean water infrastructure grant program. The grant was part of the second round of funding under the new program, which awarded a total of \$175 million this year for clean water and drinking water projects in communities throughout the state.

The clean water grant will assist the Village in reducing sanitary sewer overflow in the West Basin Drainage area, the first phase in

Mamaroneck's program to address inflow and infiltration issues that could pose a threat to Long Island Sound.

I congratulate the Village on putting together a successful application that will help to advance this important project, while easing the burden on local property taxpayers. All of the communities of the Sound Shore are working on future clean water projects and applications for upcoming rounds of grant funding.

Otis Bill to Aid in the Identification of Missing and Deceased Persons Is Signed Into Law

Every year, thousands of families in the United States face the unimaginable heartbreak of searching for a missing loved one. Indeed, on any given day, there are close to 100,000 active missing persons cases in the U.S. and more than 4,400 unidentified human remains are recovered each year.

Legislation that I initiated will hopefully help to bring closure to some families of missing persons, while assisting law enforcement agencies throughout the country that are seeking to resolve cold cases. The bill, which was signed into law by Governor Cuomo on July 21, promotes a more comprehensive sharing of fingerprints and other identifying data on unknown decedents by requiring all New York medical examiners and coroners to report identifying information to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs).

The United States Department of Justice created NamUs to address the staggering number of human remains that go unidentified each year. The database provides a convenient mechanism for medical examiners and coroners to report identifying information that can be accessed by both law enforcement officers and family members. NamUs is a free online system that families can search directly and even submit additional identifying information about missing loved ones.

While an estimated 40,000 human remains across the country remain unidentified, only about 13,000 are currently listed in the national NamUs database. Much of the discrepancy stems from the fact that while many medical examiners and coroners voluntarily submit identifying information to NamUs, they are not required to do so.

With enactment of my legislation, New York became the first state to mandate that coroners and medical examiners report information to NamUs that could aid in the identification of unknown dead or missing persons. Hailed by NamUs officials as “a bold step forward in combatting our nation’s silent mass disaster,” the new law has already been credited with helping to identify the remains of a Niagara Falls man who had been missing since January of this year. He was entered into NamUs by the Erie County Medical Examiner’s office shortly after the law became effective and was positively identified by NamUs within a few days.

Entering information into NamUs is a relatively simple process, but it can mean so much to a family struggling with the disappearance of a loved one. By ensuring that all unidentified decedents in New York be reported to NamUs, it is my hope that more remains can be identified, helping to bring closure to families and to assist law enforcement in the resolution of open criminal cases.



On December 12, Assemblyman Otis joined advocates for the disabled community and colleagues, Assemblymembers Shelley Mayer, Gary Pretlow and Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins, to share their concerns about falling reimbursement rates for Personal Care Assistants (PCAs). PCAs provide quality in-home care for our most vulnerable disabled individuals and senior citizens. The event, which was held at the headquarters of Westchester Disabled on the Move, was a collective call to action to ensure that these vital caregivers are included in the State’s efforts to provide a living wage for all workers.

Improving Openness and Accountability of Business Improvement Districts

I am pleased to report that my bill to enhance the accountability and openness of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) was signed into law by the Governor in August of this year. The new law requires owners and tenants of real property located within a BID to receive notice of the timing and purpose of BID management meetings, as well as copies of the minutes of those meetings upon request.

BIDs have become an important tool in the revitalization of downtown retail and commercial areas. Property owners and tenants agree to charge themselves an assessment above any property tax levied by a municipality or school district in order to fund a variety of mutually beneficial improvements, including enhanced security and sanitation, streetscape beautification and

special events.

State laws governing BIDs do not subject them to the state’s Open Meetings Law. Nonetheless, BIDs have broad authority to propose expenditures and spend district charges – often amounting to millions of dollars – for initiatives and services designed to promote and enhance the business district.

Given the quasi-public nature of a BID, it is important that BID activities be conducted in an open manner. The new law will help to improve the accountability of BID management associations by codifying what should be the practice of any BID – that it provide its members with timely information about meetings, proposed expenditures and other policy decisions.

The Challenge of Hard-to-Recycle Materials

Over the past few decades, researchers and governmental entities have been identifying and addressing safety, health and environmental concerns that relate to various household products that are commonly used in our homes and workplaces. While generally safe for their intended purpose, these products can pose dangers to our natural resources – soil, water and air – if not properly disposed of.

One of my roles in the Assembly is to chair the Legislative Commission on Solid Waste Management. The ability to properly dispose of or recycle materials varies throughout the state. For this reason, the Commission has undertaken a comprehensive state-wide survey to identify state and local efforts to collect and recycle certain household hazardous waste, including electronic equipment, fluorescent bulbs, used motor oil, latex paint, batteries and many other products. In some cases, state law mandates that the producers

or retailers of hazardous products, such as rechargeable batteries, cell phones and motor oil, “take-back” the products when discarded by consumers. In most other instances, local governments have established collection programs to help residents safely dispose of hazardous household materials.

We are fortunate here in Westchester that most localities have wide-ranging recycling operations, making it easy and convenient for residents to properly dispose of potentially hazardous household products that they no longer need. That may not be the case in other parts of the state. By surveying the collection and recycling efforts of counties and municipalities throughout New York, we hope to share best practices among local entities and to identify areas where additional legislation may be helpful.

Public Service Commission Begins New Review on the Marketing, Pricing and other Practices of Energy Service Companies

In 1997, the New York Public Service Commission (PSC) opened up the energy services market to competition by allowing alternative energy service companies, known as ESCOs, to serve residential and small non-residential consumers. Increased competition, the Commission reasoned, would benefit consumers by spurring innovation and providing market-driven rates for electricity, gas and other residential energy services.

Over time, ESCOs have been criticized by consumer advocates, regulators and members of the public for overcharges and other alleged abuses. Aggressive and, in many cases, deceptive ESCO telemarketing practices have also raised concern. I sponsored legislation to establish marketing rules for these companies under state law and to stop unwanted and repetitive telemarketing calls to consumers. I have also advocated for greater state oversight of the marketing practices of the approximately 200 ESCOs that operate in New York. In response to these concerns, the Governor, the NYS Department of State and the PSC have all increased scru-

tiny and oversight of ESCOs over the past three years. This past summer, the PSC announced a moratorium on ESCOs marketing to low-income residents.

The efforts of the Governor and his administration have again accelerated with the PSC's December 2nd decision to initiate a broad evidentiary proceeding into the role of ESCOs in New York's retail energy market. Concluding that retail competition in the energy marketplace has failed to fulfill the promise of competitive rates and innovative service offerings, the Commission plans to consider whether (1) ESCOs should be prohibited from providing retail services in New York; (2) the rules applicable to ESCOs should be modified, and (3) new rules and products can, in fact, be developed to provide sufficient real value to residential consumers and afford just and reasonable rates.

I will continue to follow this issue closely and to work with the PSC to ensure that ESCOs operate in the best interests of New York consumers.



Assemblyman Otis at a recent budget hearing of the Assembly Libraries and Education Technology Committee, on which he sits.



For the second year in a row, Assemblyman Otis was a chili contest judge at the Rye Chamber of Commerce Mistletoe Magic street festival. The well-attended annual event promotes local businesses, buying local, and the fun of the holiday season.

Helping Small Businesses Tackle the e-Commerce Marketplace

With the holidays upon us, nearly all consumers will take to their computers, tablets or mobile phones this season to purchase something online. Sales from Cyber Monday alone reached a record \$3.45 billion in the United States. Now, more than ever, small businesses must evolve to meet the needs of today's digital consumer.

For this reason, my annual small business forum focused on helping local merchants tap the internet with practical e-Commerce strategies to expand their businesses. On October 20, 2016, the Women's Enterprise Development Center (WEDC) and I were pleased to host an informative presentation by Jennifer Shaheen, President of the Technology Therapy Group, on the rapidly expanding e-Commerce marketplace. Attending the free event, which was held at the Larchmont Village Center, were a diverse group of small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs eager to develop online sales strategies to attract new customers. They

came with great questions, making the dialogue of benefit to all the businesses that attended.

Ms. Shaheen provided a wealth of information, often tailoring her comments to the specific businesses of the forum attendees. To compete for a share of the estimated \$1,800 that the average online shopper spends each year, small businesses must provide an attractive shopping experience. According to Ms. Shaheen, details such as increasing the speed with which an online page loads, multiple photos, loyalty programs, favorable return policies, free shipping and an active social media presence can help to translate online browsing into actual sales.

Brick and mortar stores face increasing competition from online retailers. The goal of the forum was to give these businesses the practical tools they need to establish their e-Commerce presence and grow their operations through online sales and marketing.

This marks the fourth year that I have co-sponsored a small business conference with WEDC. Past forums have focused on strategies to encourage buying local, cyber-security and health insurance options for small businesses. If you have a topic that you would like to see presented in a future small business forum, I welcome your input. Please feel free to call my district office or email me at otiss@nyassembly.gov.



Assemblyman Otis and WEDC Executive Director, Anne Janiak, welcomed Jennifer Shaheen, President of the Technology Therapy Group, as the featured speaker at their annual Small Business & Economic Development forum.

Helping Others in the Community

At this joyous time of year, it is particularly important to acknowledge and support the wonderful work of the charitable organizations that serve the needs of those less fortunate in our community. Westchester County and the Sound Shore are blessed with many worthy charities – from soup kitchens and food pantries to nursing homes, homeless shelters and animal welfare groups, to name a few – that lend a helping hand to needy children, families and senior citizens throughout the year. Your kindness will be so greatly appreciated by the non-profits and those they serve.

College Internships

Legislative internships are available to college students in my District and Albany offices. These internships focus on legislative research, analysis of state issues, correspondence and assisting constituents with problems they may be having with governmental agencies.

If you are interested in applying for the winter academic term or the summer of 2017, please send a cover letter and resume to me at otiss@nyassembly.gov. For more information, contact my District office at (914) 939-7028.



At a recent Construction Industry Council dinner, Environmental Facilities Corporation (EFC) President, Sabrina Ty and Assemblyman Otis reported on the success of New York's clean water infrastructure grant program in moving local clean water projects forward, creating jobs and protecting the environment.

Photo credit: Margaret Fox Photography.

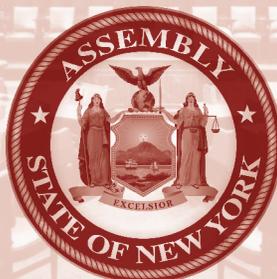


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