



Assemblyman

Steve Otis



Community Update

Winter 2015-16

Dear Friends,

This newsletter provides year-end highlights of the legislative issues I have worked on in 2015 and a preview of things to come in the new year.

My goal is to be an effective advocate on issues of importance to Westchester and to make a positive impact where I can. This year, my most significant highlight was the establishment of a new state clean water grant program to assist municipalities in paying for expensive water infrastructure projects. The proposal, which I initiated with an Assembly colleague, was included in the state budget and is already making a difference in advancing these projects.

I have also been active on a variety of important concerns affecting education, including funding for Westchester school districts and opposing our over-reliance on testing and the damaging one-size-fits all education policies in our state.

As always, I work with small businesses, local not-for-profits, school districts, and local governments to solve problems and help these institutions succeed in their missions.

I am grateful for the opportunity to serve and to work with many of you on issues facing Westchester. Problems you bring to my attention are often the genesis for identifying a concern in need of legislation or solving an individual issue you may have with a government agency.

Please accept my good wishes for you and your family in this holiday season and for a healthy and happy New Year.

Warm regards,

Otis Water Grant Program Included in 2015-16 State Budget

It is rare that one can address the difficult issues of water quality, local infrastructure, property tax relief, and job creation with a single solution, but that is what we were able to do through the creation of a new \$200 million grant program to assist municipalities in funding water quality projects. The NYS Water Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2015 was a major initiative of mine, which I developed along with my colleague, Assemblyman John McDonald. As former mayors, John (who served as mayor of Cohoes) and I have long advocated for new funding to address municipal infrastructure costs.

We proposed the program, first to our Assembly colleagues and then to the Governor. Support came from legislators around the state. Speaker Carl Heastie and the Assembly were tremendous advocates for including the grant program in the state budget. Governor Cuomo and the state environmental agencies were also enthusiastic, as was the State Senate.

Many clean drinking water and sewage treatment projects are mandated by the federal Clean Water Act. While the state Environmental Facilities Corporation (EFC) offers loans to municipalities for clean water projects, many local governments cannot take full advantage of this opportunity because they are unable to incur the amount of debt necessary to fund the overall costs of the projects.

The new grant program, which is administered by the EFC, will make it more affordable for municipalities to undertake these projects and will shift some of the costs away from already overburdened property taxpayers. By allowing local governments to combine borrowing with state grant monies, the program will help incentivize municipalities to move forward with much-needed improvements to their water quality facilities. The original commitment is to offer \$200 million in grants over three years.

The initial response to the program demonstrated the importance of these grants. Applications for the first \$50 million, which were due in September, totaled requests for over \$800 million in proposed projects.

This month, a coalition of environmental, local government, and construction groups requested that the program be funded at the \$800 million level in the 2016-17 state budget. Water quality projects important to Long Island Sound and waterways around the state will benefit from these grants. I will work with my fellow legislators, state government officials and advocates to try to grow this program. These projects are essential to protecting public health and the environment, and every dollar provided as a grant will reduce the charge on property tax bills across the state.



It was very exciting to join in the September ground-breaking ceremony for the Weber Community Gardens, which is sponsored by Port Chester Cares and a coalition of other local groups to provide gardening space and equipment for local housing authority residents.

Education Policies and Issues Dominate 2015

Education policies were at the forefront of much of the legislative activity this year for a variety of reasons. Traditionally, the role of the legislature and the governor is to focus on general policies and the education budget. In recent years, however, dissatisfaction over decisions by the Board of Regents over Common Core curriculum standards, the over-reliance on student testing and the tying of test results to teacher evaluations has brought increased intervention by the legislature and the governor.

The Board of Regents

Our state constitution gives the NYS Board of Regents the lead role in setting education policy, but there has clearly been a need to make the Regents and the State Education Department more responsive to the concerns of parents, school boards, administrators and teachers. This year we took action to address that with the selection of four new Regents to the 17-person board.

The Regent position for the Hudson Valley was open this year with the retirement of Regent Harry Phillips, who served as an independent and valuable voice on the Board for 15 years. The traditional process for replacing members of the Board of Regents had been to conduct interviews that took place solely in Albany and without much outreach to broaden the pool of applicants. This year, I helped initiate a new process whereby the Hudson Valley delegation openly sought applicants for the position and held interviews in public hearings located in Westchester. We interviewed 21 candidates through that process before the statewide interviews continued in Albany.

My priority was to find a Regent who had worked in Westchester schools, either as a school board member or educator. To make the Board of Regents more responsive to what is going on in the classroom, we need members who have lived the school district experience. Many excellent candidates fit that bill.

The four new Regents selected this year all came with local school district experience.

They took office in April and have already brought the kinds of concerns I hear from parents, school board members and teachers to the dialogue on the Board.

Selected from our region was Judith Johnson, who brings a long and accomplished career in education. Judith has served as Superintendent of Schools for both the Peekskill and Mount Vernon school districts, as an administrator focused on curriculum and instructional issues in White Plains and Mamaroneck and as Acting Assistant Secretary and Deputy Assistant Secretary for the U.S. Department of Education. She has already become a leading and effective voice on the Board. We are well represented.



Assemblyman Otis with Judith Johnson on the Assembly floor following her appointment to the NYS Board of Regents.

Education Funding

Our entire Westchester Delegation fought again this year to secure increased education aid to Westchester school districts. Statewide education funding was increased by \$1.6 billion, with Westchester schools receiving an increase of \$57.7 million.

Every district in the 91st Assembly District received increased funding, which helps contain property tax increases. This is the third consecutive year Westchester schools have gained in state aid after the lean budgets that followed the recession of 2008-09.

Stability and Care Needed in Charting Education Policies

It is now the almost unanimously held view that New York State rushed into the Common Core educational standards movement without adequately vetting the materials or training teachers to teach to the new methods. To make matters worse, the materials were not always age appropriate and the state rushed into a massive testing program, which was counter-productive to the education experience. The flaws in the program continued as the State Education Department changed the teacher evaluation system numerous times over the past five years. In addition, the program was not calibrated to address the needs of students with disabilities and English Language Learners.

In 2014, the Legislature passed legislation to prevent the Common Core test results from being included in student records, but the oppressive volume of tests continued, as did efforts to tie these discredited tests to the evaluation of teachers.

Since joining the Assembly in 2013, I have been opposed to New York's over-reliance on testing, which is eclipsing the classroom time we need for teaching. I have also opposed the idea that a single solution is appropriate for every district in the state.

It is imperative that our educational professionals at the school district level and the Board of Regents have the time they need to get these issues right before creating more annual upheaval in the schools.

As of this writing, a Common Core Task Force appointed by Governor Cuomo has issued its report recommending suspension of the use of test results in student or teacher records for four years. This will give us the time to develop a program of standards that is well thought-out, educationally valid and implemented in a way that avoids the mistakes of the past five years. The Board of Regents adopted the time-out on December 14.

It is my hope that we will continue to seat additional experienced educators on the Board of Regents and that the Regents will work with the education community in developing a program that works. I will certainly stay active in representing the students, parents, school board members, superintendents and teachers of Westchester school districts as these issues evolve. My hope is that the four year moratorium on the use of these state test results will bring stability to teaching and provide the time to make the right decisions for our students and schools.

Assemblymen Otis and John McDonald (seated), partners in developing the new state water infrastructure grant program, were the featured speakers at the December meeting of the Westchester Municipal Officials Association.



Forum on Healthcare Options for Small Businesses

In the rapidly changing healthcare marketplace, small businesses are faced with a number of questions, not the least of which is whether they are required to, or should, provide health insurance for their employees. To help businesses navigate these issues, my annual Small Business Forum focused on the topic of “Keeping Small Business Healthy: Healthcare Options for Small Businesses.” The forum was co-hosted by the Women’s Enterprise Development Center Inc. (WEDC).

The October forum featured a distinguished panel of government and industry experts who provided an overview of the marketplace for small business healthcare plans and discussed the benefits of purchasing coverage, as well as the practical aspects of how, where and when to enroll. The informative presentation

detailed the options and resources available to small business owners when considering the health insurance needs of themselves and their employees.

The audience was very engaged, and the discussion that ensued raised a number of issues from transparency in medical and pharmaceutical billing to the need to encourage wellness programs that save healthcare dollars in the long run. These concerns may well be addressed through future legislation. My office will be looking closely at these issues, as well as monitoring small business access to health insurance.

For additional information regarding healthcare options for small businesses, I have posted the PowerPoint presentations of both panelists on my website at assembly.state.ny.us/mem/Steven-Otis.

Smart School Bond Act

It is often the case that I am notified of an issue requiring correction through the observations of residents or local officials who bring their concerns to my attention. Such was the case regarding the Smart Schools Bond Act that was approved by the voters statewide in November 2014.

The Bond Act provides \$2 billion in grants to school districts to purchase computer hardware and software. Instead of these inevitable technology upgrade costs being placed completely on local property taxes, every school district in the state would receive funding to cover a portion of these expenses.

School Board members and officials contacted me with a concern regarding an unintended consequence of this new grant money within the accounting rules for the state tax cap. Many school districts were concerned that the grants for equipment

purposes would have to be counted as operating revenue, thereby forcing districts to cut programs and staff in order to stay under the tax cap while accepting the grant money. That was clearly not the intent of either the Smart Schools Bond Act or the tax cap statute.

I brought the issue to the attention of the state officials in charge of implementing the program and had an opportunity to discuss the problem directly with Governor Cuomo and State Budget Director Mary Beth Labate. They moved quickly to make sure the problem was corrected and that school programs would not be reduced by virtue of smart school grant funds received by districts. Westchester school districts are due to receive over \$61 million in grants under the Smart Schools Bond Act.

Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie Visits Local Schools

In November, I hosted a visit by NYS Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie to the 91st Assembly district. Speaker Heastie toured New Rochelle High School and met with students participating in My Brother’s Keeper, a national public and private initiative to provide mentoring, educational and other support for young men of color.

Speaker Heastie also toured the Open Door Medical facilities at Port Chester Middle School and visited with students participating in the many after school programs offered there. The Port Chester School District has been a pioneer in the community

schools concept, providing a rich continuum of educational and support services for its diverse student population.

The Speaker’s visit culminated with a meeting of school superintendents, school board presidents and educators from the 91st district who shared their experiences and concerns on key education policy and budgetary issues facing our communities. I am grateful to Speaker Heastie for taking the time to visit these schools and share in a thoughtful policy discussion with Westchester educators.



Assemblyman Otis hosted a meeting with Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie (to the right of Steve Otis) and Sound Shore educators at the Port Chester Middle School.

Otis Appointed to Assembly Panels Focusing on the Environment

In addition to my work on the Assembly Environmental Conservation Committee, I have been appointed to two new panels focusing on environmental issues.

Earlier this year, Speaker Carl Heastie appointed me to serve on a panel studying the effects of climate change. The 10-member Climate Change Task Force is exploring policy initiatives, at both the state and federal level, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and combat the effects of climate change.

The greater frequency of extreme weather events, like Superstorm Sandy, has had devastating consequences for our region.

The work of the Task Force includes promoting a reduction of greenhouse gas production, improved energy efficiency and policies to help minimize the damage from, and increase our resiliency to, natural disasters.

I was also recently asked to chair a Legislative Commission on Solid Waste Management. We are currently investigating difficult to recycle waste, including electronic equipment, batteries, chemical waste and motor oil, in order to identify best practices for municipalities to handle, recycle or dispose of such items.

The Benefits of Buying Local

As the holiday shopping rush draws to a close, I hope that you will continue to support our local businesses in the coming year. Independent small businesses are the lifeblood of our economy and give our communities their distinct charm and personalities. Studies show that every dollar spent at a locally owned business will return three times more money to other local businesses, service providers and farms than a dollar spent at a national chain. Local businesses disproportionately support local community groups, teams and charitable events and hire area residents who are invested in the success of the community. Independently owned shopkeepers and restaurants tend to carry more local products and produce, generating less traffic and air pollution and reducing our environmental impact.

For all of these reasons, I am a strong proponent of buying local. Supporting our local businesses helps our economy, which in turn, helps our local schools, property values and municipal services. So the next time you go to make a purchase or eat out with your friends and family, think local first.

Otis Secures State Grant to Reopen New Rochelle YMCA Pool

I was very pleased to have been able to play a key role in securing grant funds to allow the New Rochelle YMCA to repair and reopen its pool, which required the construction of a new ceiling and replacement of the pool's inadequate ventilation system. Assemblywoman Amy Paulin and I, New Rochelle's two representatives in the Assembly, worked together to secure two \$500,000 state grants that were crucial in allowing the repairs to proceed.

We were part of a broader community effort to save the pool that included the YMCA Board, community leaders and other elected officials including County Clerk Tim Itoni, County Legislator Jim Maisano, Senators Andrea Stewart Cousins and George Latimer, and Mayor Noam Bramson.

The pool is integral to the operations of the New Rochelle Y and its biggest source of revenue. Countless residents in New Rochelle and surrounding communities have taken advantage of the Y's many aquatic programs and thousands of area children have learned to swim at the Y pool. It is scheduled to reopen in late December, after being closed for more than a year.

I am grateful to have been able to play an important role in this project, which will benefit the area for many years to come.



Assembly members Otis and Paulin, who secured a major state grant to repair the New Rochelle YMCA pool, joined with Y youth and teen ambassadors at a community event to save the pool.



Assemblyman

**Steve
Otis**

Legislative Update

Winter 2015-16

College Internships Available

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

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 district office at (914) 939-7028.

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