

# It's the cost, stupid!

We recently received a faxed news release from Assemblyman Fred Thiele. It stated, "across the state, local districts collect about \$14 billion annually from the property tax. Between 1983 and 1993, local school taxes increased by 93%. The number of teachers rose by 11.1%. The number of administrators rose by 24.7% while student enrollment fell by 2%. At the same time, state aid increased 91% to \$9.18 billion."

The rest of the release went on to support Assemblyman Tom Barraga's bill

to cap local school taxes at their current rate but increase state aid by \$550 million annually or tie it to the consumer price index, but not less than 3%.

When Barraga first proposed this formula, it reminded us of the ill-fated measure former Governor Mario Cuomo proposed of freezing property taxes at the current level, but imposing an income tax for future growth.

A public hearing on the proposal and school financing in general will be held at 7 p.m. on Friday, December 15 at Lec-

ture Hall, Room 101 in the Shinnecock Building of Suffolk Community College in Riverhead.

Ask any taxpayer—it is not the future, it is the present that they are having trouble dealing with. They can't afford the astronomical real estate taxes that are currently being demanded of them. They are well aware that 60% to 70% of the real estate tax bill goes to fund education. They want this reduced and reduced substantially.

With falling enrollment, they want to know why we have increased our administrative costs by 25%. Why have we increased the number of teachers by 11%? Why have we increased state aid by 91%? Why haven't the costs of education fallen as the enrollment decreased? They do not want the status quo. They want real estate taxes to go down—now.

Taxpayers are realists and they are tired of the government's experiments of throwing good money after bad to improve our kids' education. Students coming out of school today are far less equipped to enter into the world of employment than they were 30 years ago. They can only read on an eighth grade level; they can only do math on a seventh

grade level. Although the method of scoring SAT tests has been adjusted downward, our students are turning up with poorer numbers than ever before.

Most of the taxpayers who got out of high school, when math was math, understand. As more is less, it should cost less to produce more. In our educational establishment, the reverse formula has, unfortunately, been proven to be true. The more we have invested in education, the poorer the product.

Weak-hearted legislators will subscribe to the Barraga theory. Strong hearted legislators such as Debra Mazzarelli, who has a bill on the books for a five-year tenure renewal after recertification, have the answers. Unfortunately, Mazzarelli has not been able to come up with a co-sponsor and she, herself, has become the target of the educational unions who cannot stand a discordant voice.

We have got to reel in the costs of education. Guaranteeing consumer price index increases, or a minimum of 3% or an additional \$550 million in state aid, is not the answer. Throwing more money at the problem is not the answer. Cutting the costs is the key.

And why not?

# A little guy wins

The federal government has thrown in the towel. The little guy, our neighborhood service station, repair shop and automotive dealer, can continue to test our cars to ensure that they meet the air quality standards. The feds, in their quest for clean air, had ordered states to implement central inspection stations or lose millions of dollars in federal aid for roads.

Former Governor Mario Cuomo was ready to roll over and give in to the feds. Senator Owen Johnson led a fight that helped block the implementation of these measures. Johnson was concerned, as was Suffolk Life, that only 11 centralized stations set up on Long Island would create gridlock, and residents would lose hours waiting in line. Both of us were concerned that the little guy, who ran repair shops and small businesses, who had invested thousands of dollars in emission testing equipment—would be forced out of business. Equipment that the state had mandated they purchase, now would have been worthless.

In throwing in the towel, the federal government has not capitulated on their demands for clean air, but they are now willing to listen to the state's plans for reaching the goal. It is expected that the repair shops will have to upgrade their equipment and inspection fees may have to be increased to pay for it. It's a compromise that will save thousands of small businesses.

The only losers are those who had hoped to profit from the centralized stations, the bureaucrats who have fewer regulations to enforce and the environmental zealots who believe that any compromise is a bad compromise. We're happy that the little guys won this battle.

And why not?

# Special taxing districts

Chances are, you are not very familiar with the special taxing districts you are called upon to support through taxes. In our communities, we have fire, water, ambulance and lighting districts which serve us.

These special districts are run by commissioners. Most of the districts do not pay the commissioners a salary, while some pay a stipend. In some cases, the commissioners are members of town boards or village boards serving a dual role; in others, they are elected by the taxpayers.

The commissioners are charged with running the business affairs of the district. They oversee the purchase of equipment, the training of volunteers and the expenditures that the district incurs. Nothing really to get excited about, just volunteers doing their job.

In some districts, however, the commissioners do more than take care of the people's needs—they take care of their own. They surround themselves in luxuries that they can't afford in their own homes or businesses. They entertain themselves lavishly on trips and junkets to faraway places they really have little need to go to. Some fly first-class; others hire stretch limos. The one report we recently read charged deluxe hotel rooms were not good enough for the commissioners and their spouses; they upgraded to more expensive suites. Some commissioners took cash advances they did not account for. Others take side trips and jaunts they have charged to taxpayers that do not have anything to do with the conventions they attend.

During the month of December,

some of these special districts will hold special elections. In the past, as few as 100 taxpayers have turned out to vote, although every taxpayer registered within the district is eligible to do so. If you don't vote for the commissioners, you give up your say as to how they spend your money.

Those who, in recent years, have been spending freely on themselves love it when you don't vote. They continue in office easily with the support they have gained through favor. They are dependent upon you to not take part in your government and not vote in these special elections. Do you care how your tax monies are being spent? If so, it only costs you time to vote, but you could save a lot.

And why not?

# There, but for the grace of God, go I

Each of us has had our ups and downs in life. One minute, you are king of the hill; the next, you are barely hanging on by your fingertips to the bottom rung. Sometimes, we go from the top to the bottom because of our own self-indulgence or stupidity; other times, life deals us cruel blows. Accidents do happen. Illness can take its toll. Jobs are lost. Businesses are forced to close.

Most of us get married and have a family. They become the center of our universe. They are our precious ones. We so desperately want to give them everything we are capable of. When you are down and out, you can't do the impossible. That's when, with a saddened heart, Mom and Dad know they do not have the resources and know that they have to prepare the kids for a bleak or empty Christmas.

One of the hardest things a parent sometimes must do is tell the wee ones, who still believe, that Santa will have to skip their house this year. Fortunately,

there are those who have never faced this excruciating pain. Most of us, however, have at one time or another been on the bottom.

The Group's mission is to step into these circumstances and provide Christmas for these families who can't do so this year. The Group has no formal structure. We are not a tax-deductible charity. We have no offices, no membership list. Not one penny is spent on administration costs.

Each year, we gather together, pool our resources, ask others to work and contribute. By the time November rolls around, we already have a list of families under consideration. We investigate without being intrusive and pray that all those whom we intend to help are legitimate.

Lists are compiled of the children, their needs and their wants. Volunteer shoppers scour the marketplace, trying to make every dollar buy \$3 worth of gifts.

Where needed, we clothe the child from basic socks and underwear to pants, shirts and outerwear. We try to buy them a few gifts that will make their life a little brighter, and a gift certificate for the Christmas meal.

Although we never know the identity of those we are helping, we conjure up visions of the families, of the children. And when we shop and wrap, these visions come alive in our imagination.

The gifts are delivered to the parents, a neighbor or a friend, a few days before Christmas. Each present has the child's name attached to it. The family is only identified by an alphabet letter. The parents give the gifts to the children from themselves or from Santa Claus. The children never know that somebody out there loved them and helped them.

Most members of the group only know each other by their first names. Last names are not important, for the spirit of the group is anonymity. We ask for no rewards. We ask for no thanks. We

come back year after year to take part in this time-consuming, grand endeavor because, "there, but for the grace of God, go I."

We receive our rewards on Christmas morning in our homes, in our churches and synagogues, knowing, because of our efforts, others less fortunate are enjoying a holiday they never expected.

The children can continue to believe; the adults know that the world is not all bad. There is still hope, and a hand has reached down that ladder to help them.

This year, we have been overwhelmed by requests. Frankly, we have more situations than we can financially take care of. We need your help. If you would like to become part of The Group, join the spirit of helping others by sharing a little bit of your prosperity in life by sending your contribution to The Group, PO Box 167, Riverhead, NY 11901.

And why not?

# LILCO breakup now makes cents

What's in it for me? Every Long Island Lighting Company (LILCO) ratepayer should be asking this question about the proposed LILCO breakup following last week's announcement by Governor George Pataki of a plan that would help reduce electric rates, boost the introduction of competition, and end LILCO's monopolistic grip on Long Island.

The Long Island Power Authority (LIPA) unveiled last week a well thought out plan for breaking up the Long Island Lighting Company, minimizing the government's involvement and maximizing non-LILCO, private ownership. The plan, if implemented, is expected to reduce our present cost of electricity by a minimum of 12%. That's a good start, nowhere near what is needed to bring our energy costs in line with the rest of the nation, but a step in the right direction.

The plan, in essence, calls for LIPA to acquire the transmission and distribution system of LILCO, with LILCO, as a corporation, selling their gas and generating operations to different profit-making corporations who would compete with each other to provide the lowest cost energy. LILCO would remain as a company, but not in the energy business on Long Island.

LIPA would purchase the power from the generators, the state power pool, and eventually, from wherever it can buy it the most economically.

LIPA will hire an outside utility or management company to operate the system. They will be responsible for maintaining and rebuilding the transmission and distribution systems. They will also distribute and market the electricity. It is expected that the current work force engaged by LILCO will become the work force of the new companies.

Rate reductions will come about because LIPA can finance the deal and refinance LILCO's debt, some of which will

be acquired through tax-free financing. Tax free bonds sell on an average of two to three points below commercial debt. Some of LILCO's current debt carries extremely high interest rates because of the shaky financial condition of the company.

LIPA will not have shareholders; it is a not-for-profit authority. LILCO currently pays dividends of about 11%. These will be eliminated, part of these dividends will be used for the acquisition and the pay-down of the debt. Part of these dividends will enable LIPA to reduce the cost of electricity to you. Some of the taxes that LILCO currently pays, or is exposed to, would be eliminated because LIPA is a not-for-profit public authority. The elimination of these taxes would reduce some of the cost of bringing electricity to you.

In the past, we have not supported any of the proposed takeover schemes. These proposals called for taking over the company as an entity. This amounted to nothing more than another bailout of the owners and bond holders of LILCO. We have consistently supported only taking over or replicating LILCO's transmission and distribution systems. Why buy the pig with all the fat when you only need the heart of the beast? Controlling the transmission and distribution is the key, and that is the key component of the new LIPA takeover plan. All the details have not been released, and the devil is often in the details.

One of the details still to be discussed is when the members of the LIPA board will be elected by the ratepayers. To us, this should be a key element of the proposal. One of the very basic principles in founding LIPA, in which Suffolk Life played a major part, was that the board of LIPA be elected by the ratepayers in a non-partisan, non-political manner.

The need for a ratepayers' voice in the selection of trustees was proven by the manner in which former Governor

Mario Cuomo used LIPA as his own little toy by putting his own people in as board members and as chairman. With that control, Cuomo was able to—and did—manipulate LIPA's actions to meet his own desires.

More recently, Sheldon Silver, speaker of the Assembly, named Richard Kessel to the new, revamped LIPA board. Kessel was the former chairman of LIPA, handpicked by Cuomo. When Cuomo came up with his Shoreham deal with LILCO, which drove rates up to the present level, Kessel was the chief salesman for the proposal. When Cuomo came up with his just-before-the-election takeover plan, Kessel was the salesman again, soliciting support. Kessel, in his new role as a board member, appears to have appointed himself a minority leader who leaks information and registers opposition to virtually everything.

Suffolk Life believes the public should insist on these elections being scheduled. LIPA still has a long way to go

to bring our energy costs in line with the rest of the nation. The takeover will save the average homeowner about two cents per kilowatt hour. A 12% savings is great, but what we should be concentrating on is how do we get the rates down to seven or nine cents per kilowatt hour?

The cost of producing electricity is under four cents per kilowatt hour, nationwide. Many utilities throughout the nation are able to distribute this energy to their customers, bill them at seven to eight cents per kilowatt hour, and make a handsome profit. This has to be the goal and the aim of LIPA. This plan takes us in this direction.

Suffolk Life likes what we see in the new plan and supports the concept of the LIPA proposal, which contains more common sense than we have heard in a long time. We await with much interest more details on the proposal, hoping that we are finally on the way to the desperately needed solution to our excessive energy costs problem.

And why not?

## Rent an army

The United States has developed one of the best trained, equipped and deployable armed forces in the world. It has been paid for 100% by United States taxpayers. It is there to protect our country from enemies. Today's armed forces is made up of all volunteers. Most of the people are career oriented.

Last week, President Clinton went on national television to sell America on the concept of lending our army to NATO to help enforce peace in Bosnia. We were assured that our people will be commanded by American military officers.

Morally and ethically we have trouble with the President's position. During this Eastern European conflict, we have had great difficulty telling one side from the other. The Bosnia war is part a religious war, part an ethnic war that has its roots in hundreds of years of local conflict. There aren't any good guys, just a lot of bad guys.

At this stage of the game, we do not see where American interests are particularly at stake. This is one country's revolution, not an international war. Somewhere, somehow, the conflicting sides have found the money to buy the bullets and the guns to kill each other. They now look to NATO to settle their differences. NATO says, we can't do it alone. Europe does not have the military, or the financial resources to ensure peace in Bosnia. They want the United States to contribute one-third of the forces, 20,000 American men and women. They want us to supply the technology, the

hardware and the military might.

How many billions of dollars is this campaign going to cost? How many American lives will be lost? How many body bags will be flown back to the United States with parts of the children we have nurtured and grown? This is not our war; why are we being asked to fight it? This is not our war; why should we agree to finance it?

We have wars right here in the United States that are going on every day, in our inner cities and our country and waysides. We have a war on drugs that has invaded every community and all too many families. We have got a war of wanton killing and destruction going on right here on Long Island and in our cities.

Recently, some punks that we should be at war against blew apart the hand of a service station operator. Other punks we should be at war have poured a flammable liquid into token booths, resulting in one death. These are Americans we should be deploying our soldiers to hunt down and eliminate.

The Bosnians, the Serbs and the Croatsians said they want help to keep them from killing each other. Are they willing to rent our army? Will they reimburse us for every cent we will spend on this mission? They had the money to wage a war; they should have the money to afford peace.

And why not?

## A good teacher

Recently, I had lunch in a local pizzeria. In the booth next to me was a white, middle-aged man with a young black boy, who I would guess was between 10 and 12 years of age. The mix was unusual, but nothing worthy of note.

As I waited for my lunch to be served, I was reading a newspaper and indulging in my favorite habit of eavesdropping. It quickly became apparent from the conversation that this was a teacher and a student. Probably the teacher taught English, possibly, history.

The teacher, in a non-threatening way, was discussing with the student a book that the student was to have read and an upcoming test. He engaged the boy in a pattern of conversation that was challenging the youngster to think. He threw out scenarios, asked the student's opinion, and challenged him to form conclusions. When this segment of the conversation ended, he urgently encouraged the boy to get 100 on the test. He told him that he could do it, that it was possible.

The conversation drifted to other subjects, how to make a pizza and what the boy was going to buy his mother for Christmas. During this segment of the conversation, the teacher gave the student some fatherly advice on what would look best on his mother and why.

As they left, I could not help but think, does this teacher do this regularly? Is this student someone special to him or does he regularly take his lunch hour to reach out to students, as he was doing with this youngster? What kind of effect will this have on the student? Will it help him become all that he is capable of?

I don't know who the teacher is, but I personally would like to thank him and others in his profession who go the extra mile.

And why not?

## Law is illogical

# Zero tolerance for alcohol

Legislation is pending to make it a crime for anyone under 21 years of age to have any alcohol content in their system and operate a motor vehicle. You are probably saying, what? We currently have a law on the books that says it is illegal for anyone under 21 to consume alcohol. That's true. But, there is nothing in the motor vehicle laws that forbids anyone with a license, under 21 years of age, from driving with alcohol in their system, providing it is under the same

state limit as has been established for adults.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD) have made this issue a priority for the last several years. Currently, a person is not considered under the influence if their alcohol level is under .10. Some legislators want to change the under 21 age to zero tolerance; others are supporting a .02 level of alcohol.

We find this illogical. If it is illegal to

purchase or consume alcohol if you are under 21 years of age, why should you be allowed to have .02 alcohol in your system? The alcohol content in your system, even though very slight, is evidence that a law has been broken, and your license should be the cost of this violation.

Let's stop being namby-pamby and start meaning what we say when we pass a law.

And why not?

# Happy New Year

The entire staff of Suffolk Life wishes all our readers and advertisers a healthy and happy New Year. If we had a magic wand and the ability to use it to bring about magical solutions, we would solve three problems.

We would find a cure for cancer. This insidious disease has harmed and killed so many. We have made huge strides in modern medicine. Is this the year we will find a cure? We pray to God for the impossible.

The other two items affect our economic health on Long Island, utility rates and school taxes. The Long Island Power Authority (LIPA) plans for a quasi-public takeover of LILCO shows promise. At least we are going in the right direction.

The LIPA plan, which was created at the direction of Governor George Pataki, projects a rate reduction of at least 12%. We believe it can be closer to 40% if Pataki attacks the problem realistically. Competition will help. Elimination of dividends will offer an automatic drop in rates. Elimination of some of the taxes will cut the cost of energy. New, profit driven, dedicated management of the companies acquiring LILCO's generating facilities will be in competition, which will add to the rate of reduction. We didn't get here in one day, we won't get out of our dilemma in one year. The Pataki plan is like a snowball rolling downhill. It may have a start slow, but it has the ability to pick up momentum.

School taxes are 70% of the cost of our real estate taxes. During 1995, we have advocated many times for a state takeover or partial takeover of the educational system. It is the constitutional responsibility of the state to provide education for the children.

The state currently pays 38% to 42% of the educational cost. The balance is picked up by local real estate

holders. The state mandates 44% to 48% of the budget. The school boards add curriculum and electives that are responsible for the rest of the budget. If the state picked up the cost for the basic core curriculum that leads to a Regents diploma, local school districts could offer only electives and cut real estate taxes 60% to 70%. If the local boards wanted to offer electives or additional curriculum, they could put these offerings up to the voters on a menu item basis. These courses approved by the voters would be paid for by the taxpayers through real estate taxes. Those that were not approved could be offered on a tuition basis, and if there was sufficient interest from the community, they could be implemented. With the state taking over the basic educational costs, administrative costs could be consolidated or eliminated. The reduction in these needless expenses would probably make up the gap between what the state is paying in state aid and the actual cost of operating a mandated educational system.

The school boards right now have the power to let the taxpayers and the users of schools determine the curriculum over and above the state mandates. They should exercise their prerogative and let the community decide the scope and depth of each community's educational package.

We do not have a magic wand. We only have this newspaper. We can bring you ideas, ways to cut and control expenses, but it is up to you to carry through on these ideas. Your involvement is critical, and our wish for 1996 is that everyone, pro or con, become involved, speak out and bring the changes needed so that we can survive on Long Island.

And why not?

## In New York

# Presidential primary

In the past years, New York was one of the late states to hold presidential primaries. The earlier states, Kansas, New Hampshire and others, received the attention, and their other votes became the most important in selecting presidential contenders.

The New York State Legislature changed this by declaring the New York State primaries would be held early in the campaign season. This would enable New York to have significant influence in the selection of presidential candidates.

The Republicans foolishly tried to fix the process so that any candidate outside the control of the Republican party would not get on the ballot. This placed the power in the hands of the few and denied grassroots Republicans the opportunity to play an important part in the selection process.

The candidates who wished to run had to receive 1,250 (5%) of the signatures of registered voters on a petition in each of the state's 31 Congressional Districts. This was a burden few could accomplish outside of those who had

been anointed by the state political organization.

Senator Alphonse D'Amato was the mastermind of this scheme. His chosen candidate was Senator Robert Dole. It looked like Dole would win New York by default. But recently, United States District Court Judge Edwin Korman ruled that the system was unfair and re-adjusted the rules so the candidates only had to secure signatures from 1.41% of the Republican voters in each district to get on the ballot. This is not insurmountable, it is doable and could ensure that the Republicans will have a choice.

Dole may ultimately be the winner, and if he is, it will be a victory he can relish, for he will have won it fair and square. The other candidates will have a chance to express their views and, if successful, carry New York which may well allow them the momentum needed to win nomination.

This is democracy in action. We support it.

And why not?



# Pataki comes alive

Governor George Pataki has released his proposed budget six weeks early, a smart thing to do. He has placed his ideas before the public so that they can be fully fleshed out and debated long before the legislature starts the next session. Pataki's budget is unusual in that it is answering the voters' demands.

The budget will produce tax cuts highly geared to the mid-income residents of the state. Businesses will see a reduction in the regulations and crippling mandates that have impeded their ability to do business in the state.

Welfare will no longer be a way of life. Able-bodied people on home relief will be limited to 60 days of assistance or less. Welfare benefits for families will be reduced to the average of our surrounding states. There will be disincentives to have more children.

On the spending side, more money will be used for day care and training of welfare recipients. Medical and other critical benefits will not be eliminated the moment a person on welfare starts to earn a salary. These benefits will be phased out as their earning power increases. This previously had been a big deterrent from trying to get off the system.

Child molesters, violent criminals will face sentences without parole. Pataki has offered a plan that will make the law-breakers think twice. Adolescents who commit adult crimes will be

charged as adults. The kid gloves will be thrown away.

Communities, instead of being given mandates, will be given block grants to solve their own problems in the best way that they can rather than being forced to adhere to state edicts.

For years, taxpayers have asked for this kind of relief. We have had politicians who have mouthed the right words, but they lacked the integrity or the will to carry forth on their promises. In this budget, Pataki is giving them a blueprint for change.

Expect to hear from every vested interest group that will be affected. There will be screams of anger and despair. Images will be conjured up of little elderly ladies dying of neglect, images of baby carriages being taken away from infants, hospitals being shut down. During the past year, these kinds of public relation gimmicks were used to stop reform and change. The disasters did not materialize. The needs of most people were met. Agencies had to prioritize and spend our money as if it was their own. What's wrong with that?

There is hope in 1996 that New York State can turn the tide and once again become the Empire State, where productivity and profit are rewarded and we extend a helping hand to everyone who legitimately needs it.

And why not?

# Enough is enough!

Suffolk County residents have spent almost a million dollars investigating the county car leasing deal, the district attorney, the Suffolk County Legislature and the respective roles that they have played in this fiasco.

There were two special investigations, one ordered by the legislature, one requested by the district attorney. There was a third investigation, done by the state, in which both a Democratic and a Republican governor had a hand. All have indicated that there were irregularities, lack of good judgment, but nothing illegal. The state's conclusion was the most damning. It basically said that it questioned if anyone was telling the truth.

The legislators didn't like the state declining to investigate further and now are asking the United States Attorney General to become involved. Enough is enough. Give us a break.

We don't need more taxpayers' dollars being wasted. The voters have already spoken. They overwhelmingly returned Gaffney to office. The legislators who were at the forefront of this issue were also reelected. District Attorney James Catterson comes up for re-election in 1997. Throw him out if that is the way you feel. It's time for our officials to stop wasting more of our tax money on this fiasco.

And why not?