

WILLMOTTS & WHY NOTS

DAVID J. WILLMOTT SR., EDITOR

State aid to schools is at a historic high and is expected to go even higher. The full implementation of the STAR program, state aid can surpass the 50% and, in some districts, pay as high as 75% of the tuition cost for students.

The quality of education varies from district to district. We operate under a fragmented system where school districts are autonomous and governed by a broad set of rules established by the Board of Regents. Except for the school board, no systemic controls in spending exist regarding how much a district depletes its budget, or how well it invests the public's money in education.

Several years ago, we called upon the Board of Regents to investigate a takeover of education on a statewide basis. In that scenario, the state would provide funding to local school districts to build and maintain school buildings. It would furnish enough funding on a statewide basis for school districts to provide education in those subjects required for a Regents diploma. Teachers and administrators would be hired, certified and paid by the state. School districts would have contracts with the state for

State Aid Or State Take Over?

those services.

If a district wanted to offer an enhanced curriculum, outside of the Regents-required state funded programs, it could. The district would outline these programs, the curriculum and the cost. If voters approved this type of program enhancement, the funds would be raised through real estate taxes. All other school costs would be approved and paid for by the state.

It is New York State's constitutional obligation to provide an education to all students up to 21 years of age. It mandates that specific courses be taught. Since this is a constitutional requirement of state government, why have we allowed the funding for this to be passed down to the local level?

State aid formulas are a maze of bureaucratic red tape that no one, not even those in state government, seems to understand. The districts with the most political clout too often end up with the lion's share of the aid, while less affluent,

less politically connected districts end up being short-changed, and the quality of education that the students acquire is below par.

The Board of Regents requires all students to master basic skills and obtain a Regents Diploma. Since it is already giving

more than 50% aid to most districts, this is a grand opportunity to look at a more universal educational system for the entire state.

This proposal has merit. It is good for the kids. It is good for the taxpayers. Governor George Pataki must establish a Blue Ribbon panel from outside the education field to crunch the numbers and work out the appropriate policies.

And why not?

Reality at Last

The speed limit will become 65 mph on the Long Island Expressway and Sunrise Highway if a bill sponsored by Senator Owen Johnson (R-Babylon) and Assemblyman Robert Sweeney (D-Lindenhurst) is enacted into law.

Most drivers are already traveling at this speed; some are going faster. Even if you want to keep at or under the speed limit, you must drive faster just to keep up with traffic. A vehicle traveling at 55 mph on either of these roads is an accident waiting to happen. The only time traffic slows down to the speed limit is if a patrol car is parked along the roadway or is going exactly 55 mph and no one dares pass him.

The LIE and Sunrise highways were built for traffic to go at least 65 mph. In recent years, both roads have been expanded and traffic lanes have been added. Statistics have shown in states that have increased the speed limit to 65 mph, or even 75 mph, the accident rate has not gone up. Lower speed limits actu-

ally encourage more dangerous driving and road rage.

We have seen people in the fast lane driving 55 mph, with cars behind them driving on their tail, blinking their lights, blowing their horns and giving them the proverbial sign language.

Because of slow traffic road rage, we recently witnessed a near miss when a driver in the fast lane decided to put on his brake lights. If it were not for some good defensive driving, there would have been a pile up.

If the legislature enacts this bill and the governor signs it, police should become more diligent in enforcing reckless driving laws, and have zero tolerance for road rage. Police should also insist that a safe distance be kept between cars, and a summons be given to anyone who fails to signal when changing lanes.

Drivers must be brought to the realization that higher speed limits warrant safer driving skills.

And why not?

Post Office Food Drive, May 8

Food pantries throughout Long Island are running out of supplies. When the hungry approach, they have little to offer. Some families are only able to exist through the aid of area food pantries. The existence of food pantries assures that food will be on the tables of the needy.

For the last three years, the United States postal carriers have held an annual food drive. They ask every mail recipient to leave some form of non-perishable food by their postal box. It can be one item or it can be a bag of groceries. They ask everyone to participate. How about you?

When you do your weekly shopping, why not buy something for our hungry,

add something to one of their meals or buy a week's worth of groceries. Put out your offering before the mail carrier arrives this Saturday. Your carrier will deliver your mail and pick up your contributions. The food will be taken to your local post office, and then trucked to a central warehouse, where it will be inventoried and shipped to the food pantries run by churches and other civic groups.

The post office personnel are doing their part. Let us help them complete the job.

It is hoped, through your generosity, that there will be enough food to carry the pantries through to the end of the year.

And why not?



Suffolk Is Opposed

Almost everyone we have spoken to in scouting from Suffolk County is opposed to a proposed merger of the Nassau and Suffolk scouting councils.

Many of the scout leaders from Suffolk, who have been involved for decades, have said they will resign their leadership positions if the merger goes through. They do not want a Nassau-dominated council that will take away Suffolk's independence and financial stability. They do not want the Suffolk office

closed or to come under the dominance of the Nassau County Scouting Executive Office.

Scout officials from both Nassau and Suffolk counties will have an opportunity to vote this coming week. We fear if the proposed merger goes through, scouting as we know it will no longer exist in Suffolk County.

We encourage Suffolk's scouting officials to oppose this merger.

And why not?

Happy Mother's Day

I experienced a double dose of memories this week. May 6 was my mom's birthday, and this year, Sunday, May 9, is Mother's Day. I hope everyone has as many fond memories of their mother as I do of mine.

My mom was a wonderful woman. She was filled with caring, compassion and had an abundance of love. Never once do I recall her putting herself before her children or their father. Dad was her king. She was his queen. Life was not always easy, but she was always optimistic and presented this quality to everyone around her.

Although mom has been gone for a long time, I remember her daily. Even today, when I am hurt, disappointed or disillusioned, I have a tendency to look up to the sky and ask for her blessing.

Most of you have mothers similar to mine. God gave these women an incredibly difficult but very special

vocation. It is a job they seldom complained about. This Sunday, all of us have an opportunity to pay tribute to our moms — whether they are still with us or have moved on.

To those who are fortunate enough to still have their mom, make her day an extra special one. Show up unexpectedly if you have not visited for a while. If she lives too far away to personally visit, use the phone, send some flowers. If your mom has passed on, send a prayer.

Let her know how wonderful she has been and how much you appreciate all the sacrifices she has made on your behalf. If for some reason you are at odds with your mom, wouldn't this make a wonderful opportunity to forgive and forget? You both will be better people for it.

Happy Mother's Day, Mom, love you always.

And why not?

WILLMOTT & WHY NOTS

DAVID J. WILLMOTT SR., EDITOR

We Can't Legislate Insanity

three articles had alleged the problem was drugs or alcohol. Yet, he said, when he and others investigated the background of these crimes they found the perpetrators in each tragedy were either alcoholics or drug users, who were under the influence at the time of the crime.

In each of these news stories, it was reported the car caused the accident, the gun killed the person, or scalding water killed the child.

The challenges our country faces are how to identify and control mental instability, whether it be the result of genetics or substance abuse.

This brings up the question: how far should Big Brother be allowed to go in controlling our behavior? Under the current laws concerning mental illness, people who have been found to be mentally ill cannot be hospitalized or forced to take medication against their will. The law allows these people to roam freely, providing they have not demonstrated any outward act of physical violence.

The perpetrators at Littleton might have been identified as mentally unstable. It might have been known they were a danger to their fellow students and to themselves. But, there is almost nothing

under our current laws that could have been enforced to keep them from getting into that school and doing what they did.

We recently had a discussion with a long-time school board member from Suffolk County. He expressed fear that what happened in Littleton could happen in Suffolk. He went on to say many other school board members throughout Suffolk are fearful as well.

Is there any way we can keep our schools safe? Should we install metal detectors or surveillance cameras in every area of the school? Should the prin-

cipals or superintendents have the right to ban any student from school if he/she is suspected of being mentally unstable, or under the influence of alcohol or drugs? Can we make our schools a safe incubator, and, if we can, how do we protect these people when they go out into the real world?

We warn against cheap spins that totally miss their target. If you buy into a manufactured, politically correct concept, you may be used to fulfill a political agenda that may not be in your best interest.

America is calling out for an answer. And why not?



End The Suffolk County Pork Barrel

We received a single-spaced, 12-page list of organizations throughout Suffolk that will benefit from the county legislature's generosity. The legislature wants to hand out \$746,500 of your tax money.

The list is an absolute disgrace. It is discriminatory and prejudicial. It is anything but fair.

Why should a particular church be singled out for pork while another is not considered? Why should one Little League be rewarded, and another punished? Why should some towns receive a huge amount of grants, while other towns receive absolutely nothing?

In going over the list, it appears that Southold, East Hampton, Southampton and Shelter Island did not receive anything. Riverhead had only a pittance this year and has received little in the past. Several hamlets in the five western towns also were overlooked.

These grants are called "member items." The practice was started in the New York State Legislature and has been emulated by the Suffolk County Legislature. There does not seem to be

any rhyme or reason for this tax-dollar giveaway. There is no criteria or even a requirement for need.

This squandering of your tax dollars is a blatant attempt by the county legislature to curry favor with special interest groups within its legislative district. It is a disgraceful practice and not a necessary function of government, especially county government.

Every time you make a purchase, you are contributing to this waste. Every time you pay your real estate taxes, you are giving these politicians money to throw away.

Only you can put an end to this disgraceful practice. Our representatives in the county legislature do not have the willpower to break away from this pork-barrel ideology, so let us help them.

Write or call your legislator today. Tell him or her that the trough should be closed down. Tell your legislator you will make your own contributions to the charities you wish to support. Tell them you do not want them taking your tax dollars from you for this purpose.

And why not?

School Vote, May 18

This Tuesday, May 18, is the day we elect new school boards, and are given the opportunity to vote on school expenditures for the coming year.

School taxes are between 65% and 75% of our real estate tax bills. The remainder goes to fund our towns, the police, the county and all the special districts for which we are charged.

It is disappointing to note that each year hundreds of thousands of people do not participate in this important election. In effect, these people are telling their school board they do not care what or how the board spends that money — they simply do not want to be involved.

In recent years, we have noticed a trend where teachers and other educational establishment employees are running for school board positions. Having teachers in control of how a district allocates its spending plan is like putting the fox in the hen house and then wondering why the chickens are disappearing.

In most cases, these candidates do not work in the district where they are seeking to become a trustee, but they are still part of the system that eats up 70% of our real estate taxes.

We are all familiar with the parity issue and the leapfrogging of contract negotiations, where each district ends up offering a better salary and benefit package than the surrounding districts, while district residents watch their real estate taxes go up to pay for these giveaways.

Beginning teachers start at between \$26,000 and \$40,000 per year, depend-

ing on the district. Many teachers with tenure and seniority are making \$60,000 to \$130,000 per year, again depending on the district. No cap exists on salaries as long as the budgets are passed.

Look over the candidates running for school board. Check their credentials, where they work and where their spouses work. If candidates are educators, or will benefit from the system, examine them with a discerning eye. Are they running to protect the kids' interest, or their own financial gain?

In recent years, the Tax PAC movement has waned in some communities, but is still alive and well in others. These organizations are made up of volunteers. They do their homework and generally keep themselves involved with school issues. Consider Tax PAC's recommendations seriously. In most cases, you will find the candidates it supports have a balanced agenda between what is good for the children and what is good for the taxpayers.

This year, if a budget is turned down, it can only be put up one more time, so your vote does have some meaning. If a budget is turned down, the school board must reconsider its expenditures. If it is turned down a second time, the district must live with the previous year's budget.

On May 18, make time in your busy schedule to exercise your right to have your say in how your school will be run, and how your money will be spent.

And why not?

WILLMOTTS & WHY NOTS

DAVID J. WILLMOTT SR., EDITOR

Early this year, it unfortunately appeared that County Executive Robert Gaffney would not face much of a challenge for his quest for a third term.

By mid-spring, however, there was a buzz that there could be a primary. Both Islip Town Supervisor Pete McGowan and Suffolk County Sheriff Patrick Mahoney were considering challenging Gaffney.

In a surprise political move, Suffolk County Republican Chairman Howard DeMartini held an early convention just for the nomination of county executive. This was designed to head off any challenge.

The day that Mahoney announced he was forming a committee to explore a possible run for county executive, District Attorney Jim Catterson Jr., a Gaffney ally, indicted the Sheriff's head mechanic on a variety of charges. Insiders believe that the timing of this indictment was

Mahoney Makes It A Race

planned to take the wind out of Mahoney's sails, for it was too convenient and trite.

Instead of being knocked out of the box with the early nominating convention and the indictment of his head mechanic, Mahoney put on the gloves. He resigned from the Republican party and enrolled as a Democrat. He is seeking the Democratic nomination and the cross-endorsement of the Independent, Conservative and Right to Life parties. He is expected to get the Democratic nod as the Democrats do not have any old-timer with the name recognition or ability to raise the money needed for a campaign. Mahoney is expected to primary Gaffney on the third party lines if he is not nominated by third party committees. Gaffney will do

likewise.

New York's newly elected federal Senator Charles Schumer wants the county executive on his Democratic side of the aisle. He has pledged personal support, workers and cash to help with the race. This should counterbalance Republican Governor George Pataki's involvement on Gaffney's behalf.

Mahoney has been at war with the Gaffney administration for a number of years. The crux of the dispute is the interference by the county executive in the operation of this independently elected office. Gaffney's labor negotiator, David Greene, has repeatedly sold the Sheriff out in arbitration situations.

On two occasions, Mahoney has attempted to assign probationary, first-

year deputy sheriffs "at will". Instead of putting these deputy sheriffs on rotating shifts, he has assigned them to work the busiest periods of the work day, saving county taxpayers over a \$276,000 in overtime every two weeks.

Gaffney's labor negotiator, David Greene, is alleged to have given in to union demands and crippled Mahoney's efforts to save taxpayers money by curbing overtime.

The county executive's race, prior to Mahoney's announcement, appeared to be a shoo-in for Gaffney. The emergence of Mahoney as a candidate may well make this Gaffney's race of a lifetime. It is a race that Gaffney could conceivably lose. Both men are experienced campaigners.

One thing for sure, this will not be a dull political summer and that is good for the government of Suffolk County.

And why not?

Suffolk Has The Right To Sue

The Suffolk County Legislature last week authorized a suit against LIPA. The legislators claim that it is not fair or reasonable for Suffolk residents to be charged 2% more for electricity than their counterparts in Nassau. The suit is also seeking to recover the \$30 million that Suffolk residents have already been overcharged through this bifurcated rate.

LIPA has been charging Suffolk residents this penalty to finance the certiorari suit that it acquired when LIPA took over LILCO. The law that created LIPA specifically stated that LIPA would not be entitled to the LILCO certiorari settlement. Suffolk County sued on this point and won, but LIPA has continued to try and

collect the overcharge.

At the same time, Suffolk County and LIPA are currently in negotiations. They are trying to reach a compromise on the issues of the Shoreham certiorari judgment, the payments LIPA has made in lieu of property taxes, the bifurcated rate, and the value of certiorari suits against Nassau County that were dropped.

LIPA is appealing the Supreme Court ruling that freed Suffolk from this liability. No one can predict what the courts will do. A settlement may be the best way to go if it works to the advantage of Suffolk residents. If it does not, we should pursue every avenue in the courts.

And why not?

Boy Scouts Win

The Suffolk County Boy Scouts will remain independent. There will be no merger between the Nassau Theodore Roosevelt Council and the Suffolk County Council of Boy Scouts.

We believe the outcome of the vote last Wednesday night will benefit both councils in the long run. Long Island is just too darn big to have a single council.

Many of the rank and file in both Suffolk and Nassau who are the backbone of the scouting movement opposed this merger. The misinformation that was circulated during the campaign built distrust. This misinformation flowed from both sides of the argument. The supporters of the merger made a couple of classic blunders from which they never recovered.

The system of voting left many perplexed and in itself, gave cause for alarm even though it was approved by the National Council.

At the tail end of the campaign, the troop leaders and their support staff, who many believed would be able to vote, were told they could not. Only the sponsors' representatives were allowed to

cast a vote. Sponsors are normally churches and community organizations. Their representatives do not have to be actively involved in scouting, and although encouraged to do so, do not have to listen to grass roots opinions.

Now that the campaign is over and the supporters of keeping Nassau and Suffolk independent have won, we recommend that they take advantage of the enthusiasm and the renewed spirit created by this vote and redirect it to building both Nassau and Suffolk councils into the best in the country.

Involvement in Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts is wonderful training and achievement for our youth. The children are taught values, discipline, and respect for hard work. Scouting builds character, is educational and a lot of fun.

If you have a son or daughter of scouting age, encourage them to become involved. Scouting is one of those projects that pays dividends both now and in the future. If you can, you should consider volunteering your time to the scouting movement.

And why not?



When To Kill A Sales Tax

It appears the Suffolk County Legislature and the county executive have agreed to kill the sales tax on purchases of clothing and shoes costing less than \$110. The question now is, when to kill it?

The Democratic legislators want the county sales tax to end this December. This coincides with the state's elimination of the sales tax on these purchases. These legislators also want it to end in December so they can use it as a campaign issue in this November's race.

County Executive Robert Gaffney wants to kill it a year from this December. Gaffney claims he wants to be sure the drop in sales tax collections can be made up with other revenue and cuts in county government. We fear this is also a political ploy. Over the last eight years, Gaffney has demonstrated that he has a

passion for spending every tax dollar he can extract from the people. If he is reelected, there will be little to stop him from saying, "We can't enact the sales tax reduction because we have spent too much money."

The middle ground is simple if you take a common sense approach. Starting this December, bank the sales tax collected on clothing items sold for less than \$110, for one year. Place the money in an untouchable, dedicated fund. Release the money next December and enact the reduction in the sales tax. The money will be there to fund the tax cut and the politics will have been taken out of the proposition.

With this common sense approach, elected officials have an opportunity to do the right thing. The public deserves it.

And why not?

WILLMOTTS & WHY NOTS

DAVID J. WILLMOTT SR., EDITOR

According to the Suffolk County Charter, the county executive is required to convene a panel every 10 years to review this document. The members of the panel are charged with looking at the overall operations of Suffolk County and the charter itself, which establishes the rules and regulations for county government.

This year, the Charter Review Commission came back with 15 recommendations. Some feel these recommendations are steeped in politics and may not be for the betterment of good government.

One of the suggestions we agree is a recommendation to combine the operations of the county comptroller and the county treasurer. Both departments deal with finances and they often end up duplicating efforts. Savings can be realized by combining the departments into one and Suffolk residents might be better served.

The Charter Commission also recommends the sheriff, treasurer and county clerk be changed from elected positions to appointed ones.

Suffolk Life vehemently disagrees with this recommendation. Under the current system, the sheriff, clerk and treasurer are directly answerable to the voters. Every four years, we the people are able to examine the jobs these elected office holders have done. They are forced to justify their management

Does Suffolk's Charter Need Revising?

decisions, and the public has the ultimate voice on whether they will return to office or be replaced with someone new.

To give the county executive the ability to put appointed cronies into these positions is vesting far too much power in the hands of one individual. We have seen this county executive (and others) appoint political hacks to top positions even though their appointees had neither the qualifications nor the ability to grow into those positions.

In government, you frequently do not get the best person for the job through the appointment process. Political connections are substituted for qualifications.

This is a blatant power grab by the county executive.

The Charter Revision Commission also recommended expanding the Suffolk County Legislature from 18 to 19 members. The commission argues that 18 legislators (or any other even number) have a potential of creating a deadlock vote. But with so many diverse personalities on the legislature it would be extremely rare for them to be dead-

locked on anything.

If the Charter Revision Commission felt so strongly about this issue, why not downsize the legislature to 17 members. Have 16 legislative districts and 16 legislators, then have one at large legislator who would be the presiding officer elected by all the people in the county.

The greatest failure of this Charter Review Commission is its inability to delineate the specific duties and responsibilities of the legislature. When the legislature was formed almost four decades ago, it was apparent the charter did not define the role of this branch of government. It did a decent job of spelling out the duties and responsibilities of the county executive, but left the legislators to figure out for themselves who they were and what the scope of their organization was to be.

The charter did not specify whether

the legislators were to be full-time or part-time, or whether they had to confine their responsibilities to making laws or if they were free to roam throughout the county, interfering with administrative responsibilities.

In fact, there have been many legislators who have pictured themselves as mini county executives, which we do not believe was the intent of the original charter.

We had hoped this Charter Review Commission would have tackled the difficult undertaking of defining the specific areas of responsibility and standard operating procedures for the legislature as a whole, and for the individual elected office holders. Its failure to act on this oversight means we will continue to have a legislative body that has been characterized by some as a circus. This is unfortunate, but without rules and regulations, what can you expect?

The Charter Revision Commission fell short of its mission. The document it has produced is not an example of good government. The people of Suffolk County deserve more.

And why not?

Dumbing Down Welfare Reform

The United States Supreme Court recently heard a case concerning a welfare recipient's right to move into a state for economic benefits.

When Congress reformed the federal welfare rules, it outlawed the practice of some welfare recipients moving from their home state to another state because that state's benefits were more generous.

The law was challenged and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the taxpayers and in favor of those who are manipulating the system. The Supreme Court's majority said the restrictions on benefits interfered with a citizen's freedom to travel from state to state.

The Supreme Court's minority argued that welfare recipients are free to travel anywhere they wanted as allowed by the Constitution, but could not do it simply to benefit economically because of another state's welfare program.

We believe Congress was right when it changed the law allowing the states, for one year only, to pay the same benefits a recipient would have received in his or her home state.

We are perturbed by the Supreme Court's majority decision. Welfare reforms enacted by Congress and implemented by the states have cut welfare rates and benefit pay-outs by as much as 50%. Some states, including New York, have ceased to become a magnet. This has helped put our

own financial house in order.

The Supreme Court's majority ruling will once again open the flood gates. The governor and the state legislature will again be forced to consider cutting benefits for all welfare recipients and this will hurt some of New York's neediest residents.

New York State's own Supreme Court has thrown another curve at welfare reform. New York State Supreme Court Justice Sheila Abdus-Salaam recently wrote a decision decreeing that legal immigrants are entitled to Medicaid benefits.

In 1997, a law passed by the legislature and approved by Governor George Pataki disallowed legal immigrants from receiving Medicaid coverage. This new decision will subject state taxpayers to millions of dollars in additional state funds to cover these people, who are not even U.S. citizens.

Immigrants coming from third world countries often have a disproportionate number of illnesses that are the result of being raised in poverty. They will now be eligible for full Medicaid coverage, which often surpasses the coverage that hard working taxpayers can afford for themselves.

Both of these bleeding heart decisions are wrong. Our laws should benefit, not burden, the taxpayers.

And why not?



Remember Our Heroes

This Monday means much more to us than family gatherings, backyard barbecues or celebrating the start of summer.

Memorial Day is the day we remember the incredible sacrifices by our armed forces. This includes the giving of one's life by the brave, the valiant, and, yes, the sometimes fearful men and women who have served our country.

The Memorial Day services I experienced as a young man growing up in Riverhead are still etched in my mind. The names of older kids I knew were engraved in steel on plaques, but the lives were forever lost. I remember the words spoken by the commanders, rabbis, and priests, the sorrowful sound of "Taps" and the reverberating echoes of rifle salutes.

I remember that some of those names belonged to the kid on the football team, the boy who delivered packages and the kid who took out the pretty girl who lived

next door. All gone, all memories.

Today, although we are not technically at war, we have thousands of men and women poised to do battle in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The dark clouds of war once again fill our skies.

Have we learned nothing from the past? Do we need to be there? Are we protecting a vital interest? Are the people we are there to protect with us? Is it just money driving both these conflicts? If so, should men or women be expected to give up their lives for someone else's greed or gain?

This Monday, put aside a few minutes to remember those who gave so unselfishly of themselves so that we can live in freedom. Say a prayer for their souls and plead with God to end our current nightmare and let peace return to the world.

And why not?