

BOCES I and II, consolidated

For the good, the bad or the indifferent, State Education Commissioner Thomas Sobol ordered the consolidation of BOCES I and II (Board of Cooperative Educational Services First and Second Supervisory Districts). He is still considering the possibility of ordering the consolidation of BOCES III, which would give Suffolk a single BOCES district.

The consolidation is estimated to save almost \$2 million in BOCES educational costs. Most of the savings will come from excess administration. The consolidation will, for the first time, put new programs in reach

for students from the East End who were formerly served by the old BOCES I.

This consolidation gives the combined boards of I and II an ideal opportunity to reformulate a plan for the new, consolidated BOCES I that eliminates the fat, the waste and the duplication.

The new BOCES board will be headed by Edward Milliken, who currently heads BOCES II. The estimated charges for BOCES I should drop from \$130 per weighted pupil attendance to \$71. This is close to what the charges are in BOCES II.

BOCES originally started out with a mandate to provide vocational education and other programs that individual school districts could not offer on their own. Its mission has been expanded into servicing the physically handicapped and the mentally retarded.

This merger gives BOCES an ideal opportunity to review its entire mission, to examine each and every program it offers for both cost effectiveness and productivity. Those programs that are not fully subscribed to should be eliminated and those programs that are not cost effective should be sunset.

The existing contract between labor and management will be honored for its duration. By the time it expires, management should have taken a close look at all personnel and offer new contracts only to those who have proven their indispensability.

The new BOCES should bear close scrutiny and have its progress monitored. Consolidation seems to be one of the few areas through which we can gain control over the escalating costs of education and government. Let's hope that this consolidation proves to be productive and a good role model for others in the future.

One note of discouragement, however. Sobol took no action concerning the board members in BOCES III who so willingly gave away almost a million dollars to its retiring superintendent, Dr. Edward Murphy. Those board members continue to serve and continue to spend taxpayers' dollars. While they took some heat when the scandal first was publicized, they are still there because Sobol did not have the courage to oust them from their positions to prevent further damage to the district.

While Sobol deserves credit for having the courage to order the consolidation, his refusal to deal severely with those who wasted so much money, which could have been used for the education of kids rather than the enrichment of an administrator, is deserving of scorn.

And why not?

Dumping the \$\$\$ woes

Islip Town officials came under fire earlier this year for a decision that took unto itself funds that previously had been utilized by school districts to meet operational costs. That subject came up again last week via a court decision that ruled the town was wrong in its action.

After 20 years of sharing proportionate PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) payments, funds paid by developers who have received tax abatement benefits granted by the town's Industrial Development Agency (IDA), with local school districts, town officials, acting in their capacity as IDA trustees, decided to keep all the money instead. The rationale, according to Supervisor Peter McGowan, was that the school districts waste money, and the town "could best handle the funds."

The town took this action without prior notice in a closed-door meeting. While McGowan was not present at that meeting and therefore did not vote on the matter, he is a strong proponent of the action. Councilwoman Pam Greene abstained in that vote. Councilman Chris Bodkin was not on the board at the time, but wholeheartedly supports the action.

The school districts, understandably angered, took the action to court. Last week, State Supreme

Court Judge Alan Oshrin agreed with the school districts, ruling the districts are entitled to the withheld funds.

In our view the town was wrong in its action both morally and ethically, and now legally. While we would agree that there is waste in school district operations, the town is not pure in this regard. This is the same town, although now in a new administration, that dipped into garbage district funding to offset financial problems in the town's operating budget. The town was sharply criticized by the state comptroller for that action and was ordered to pay the money back to the garbage district.

Unfortunately, town officials now claim they will appeal last week's decision, and that action will only result in the waste of more dollars for legal fees by both parties. It's unfortunate that the town officials who press for an appeal are not held personally responsible for the additional costs this will require.

The result of the IDA action enriched the town at the expense of the taxpayers in the school districts impacted. These same residents are, of course, town taxpayers as well. The action did little more than transfer the impact of financial problems

from one level to another. It just gave the town more to spend, and the school districts less, the same kind of arrogant attitude too often seen at the state level which meets its own spending excesses with reductions in state aid to municipalities and schools.

Isn't it time to stop dumping the financial woes on other levels of government, and start meeting the needs of the taxpayers with sound efficient financial operations at every level? The first step for Islip officials would be to drop thoughts of an appeal and stem the waste of additional funds for an action that was wrong to begin with.

And why not?

Too little, too late

Governor Cuomo announced this week he is willing to give Suffolk County half the purchase price for the acquisition of Robins Island. He is not willing to use his own money; he will be using ours. Instead of that share of the money coming out of the county pocket, it will come out of the state pocket of taxes.

The deal struck by the county allows for development on about 7.5% of the island, the other 92.5% would be maintained as a preserve. The cost of acquiring the island is over \$18 million with interest. The 35 acres planned for development will cost the county and the state over a half-million dollars per acre.

The deal the county had worked out with the owner and has signed contracts for was the best deal the county could hope for. The acreage allocated for development will remain a taxpayer. It is estimated that the taxes on this developed land could average over \$2 million per year. Currently, taxes on the entire parcel are \$86,882. The land would be developed on a cluster basis and would be limited to very expensive summer homes for the rich and the famous. The remaining 92.5% of the island would remain as it is now. No development would be allowed and the management of this land would be controlled by the land owners and the county.

The governor's offer comes too late in the process. It can only muddy the waters further, causing extensive litigation that will cost the taxpayers a bundle.

And why not?

Important meeting notice

What's wrong with education?

Governor Mario Cuomo commissioned a panel to investigate education in the State of New York, which has held five hearings throughout the state. The New York State Special Commission on Educational Structure, Policies and Practices will hold its last hearing today, in the Babylon Town Hall from 2 to 5 p.m. and 6 to 9 p.m.

We received word of this hearing late Friday afternoon when one of the panel commissioners called to

find out if we had been alerted. We hadn't. He said the educational community was well aware of this meeting, but the public wasn't. He invited us, and all who are interested in the quality and the cost of education, to appear before the panel. They want to know the public's concerns, not just those of the educational community.

This is your opportunity to speak out, to be heard on the cost and the quality of education. The commis-

sion is looking not only to focus on the ills of the current educational system, but for suggestions from citizens on better ways to finance education and make it more productive. The findings will be produced in a report which will be submitted to the governor and the state legislature.

This is the public's opportunity to be heard loud and clear. We encourage your attendance. Today is the day. Babylon Town Hall, 2 to 5 p.m. and 6 to 9 p.m. Be there!

And why not?

Shared services: the time is now!

In talking to political candidates from throughout the county and its towns for the past several weeks, an interesting philosophy appears to be emerging. The realization has seemed to sink in that the taxpayers shoulder the burden of financing all levels of governments and districts, including the schools. There is more and more talk about shared services, and that is good.

Throughout our interviews, the concept of shared services has received more attention than it has in the past, particularly on town levels. In Babylon Town, for example, talks are ongoing between town and Lindenhurst school officials on a proposal to have the town provide

security patrols for school district buildings. The plan is to have the town's public safety division provide two officers for two shifts to conduct a vehicle patrol of the district's 10 buildings. At present, this function is provided by part-time district security employees. The estimated cost savings to the district could be about \$150,000.

Babylon Town officials are also talking with Copiague and West Babylon school districts who are interested in exploring the possibilities of the town providing fencing and blacktop repairs, as well as signs for the districts. Amityville and Babylon Village schools are also exploring potential shared services opportunities with the town.

We applaud those efforts and encourage more. There are many other areas which could benefit from the sharing of equipment, manpower and facilities between different levels of government and school districts. Snow plowing, lawn maintenance, the use of school facilities for town recreational programs, and joint purchasing efforts, which are currently practiced in some areas, are just the tip of the iceberg. Shared computer services, perhaps even training, could also be possible.

The county is exploring the possibility of utilizing, and paying for that use, town equipment to plow snow from county roadways. In one instance, in Smithtown, the town is in-

involved in plowing state roads and is reimbursed for that effort.

The subject of shared services is not new. But the problem has always been a matter of "turf," with each level and district anxious to protect the sovereignty of its own. County officials have too often looked down at towns as "dark holes into which we pour money," as one former legislator stated. The county, which had paid the out-of-county tuition costs of students going to community colleges, has tried to drop that expense on the shoulders of the towns, ignoring the financial impact on those towns' taxpayers. Islip Town recently moved to keep for its own use the payments in lieu of taxes revenues which had been shared with school districts for the past 20 years. That action was recently ruled illegal by the courts. Hopefully those attitudes will come to an end. Their intent is purely self-protective, not in the best interests of the taxpayers. The truth is the turf belongs to the taxpayers, as does the government and all it owns.

It's time for a shared services summit to be held with officials of all levels and districts on hand. A committee should be established to work toward an expansion of the shared services philosophy. The taxpayers could be spared millions of dollars now being extracted from their pockets to pay for duplication of efforts, for specialized equipment that might possibly be shared, and a united effort to battle against the mandates forced down from governmental levels above them.

What it needs is the leadership to make it happen. Aren't there leaders out there with the ability to bring people together to resolve the financial problems that afflict everyone?

And why not?

Our values are not theirs

Last year when the country was clamoring for a military involvement in Somalia, we wrote an editorial that was not one of the more popular. We had urged caution.

We had just returned from a trip to South Africa. We realized, first hand, that our values were not necessarily the same as most Africans. Our concepts of living and dying are not theirs. Life in South Africa is dispensable. Their heritage, their culture, has always placed them close to the peril of death. As Africans have roamed the continent, they have continually fought tribal wars. Many Africans live today as they lived before Christ.

Our involvement in Somalia was purely altruistic in the beginning. With a hip, hip, hooray, we were bringing in food to the starving. As we expected, our leadership totally underestimated the resiliency of the warlords and their determination to

continue with their way of life. We saw a long-term involvement. Our aims would not be accomplished in a few days, a few months or a few years.

When you give a man a handout, you are giving him nourishment for the day, but not a way out of the quagmire he is in. When the bread is eaten and the stomach is full, he resents you for having because he still is without.

There was much talk in December of last year about glorious United Nations efforts, but it was plain to see it was the United States leading the charge and bringing up the rear.

We are now in another no-win situation, just like Vietnam. We can't get out with all of our men or with dignity. We can't leave our POWs behind.

Bush's plan was originally to go in and get out. The Clinton administration has not appeared to have a

plan. Time will tell whether a real plan will emerge or more rhetoric will prevail.

Our Somalia experience should teach us once and for all that we alone cannot be the world's cop and we can't afford to be the world's chump.

If there is to be any validity to the continuation of the United Nations, that organization must be in the forefront of policing the world and providing the humanitarian efforts where and when needed. Our participation should be limited to the percentage of involvement by other countries around the world. American men and women in our armed forces should not be asked to shoulder the entire burden.

We should not be asked, or expected, to resolve the problems of the world. It's time others share the burden in a meaningful way.

And why not?

It's your money! Do you care?

If Brookhaven Town's insurance was put out to competitive bid, the residents of Brookhaven could save at least \$1.2 million, according to information obtained by Councilwoman Pat Strebels, who launched an investigation into possible insurance savings by contacting a number of insurance firms.

Under the current system, there is no competitive bidding on the town's insurance even though the town's insurance is budgeted at about \$6 million a year. The insurance business is routinely given to two brokers, Hughes and Still and the Tom Neppell Agency. Both firms have a long history of political involvement. A recent study by Coopers & Lybrand, a New York City firm, indicated the town could realize a "considerable savings" if the commissions paid by the town for this in-

urance were to be negotiated, rather than based on the volume of premiums. The study did not obtain the percentage of commissions earned by the two firms, but estimated them at 11%. Unfortunately, this recommendation is not one we'd bet on being followed up. Town officials have been so "happy" with their current practice, we simply cannot picture them telling their current brokers to cut the commission percentage. It was only through the pressure applied in editorials in this newspaper, and Strebels' efforts, that the town finally put out RFPs (Request for Proposals) for insurance companies--not brokers because "we're happy with our brokers"--and that effort brought a savings of \$561,000. Town officials are now proclaiming that savings as a big accomplishment on their part. Don't be fooled. Just imagine how much the taxpayers could have saved

over the years if the RFPs had been put out earlier?

The board members are vehement in keeping the status quo, keeping the system in place that rewards the chosen few and assures the war chests to keep them in office.

The Coopers & Lybrand study had some good things to say about the town's insurance program--the coverage is adequate and the service is good--and town officials are using those comments to declare everything is fine and dandy. "The issue is dead," they declare. They have conveniently disregarded the study's comments about "considerable savings" through negotiated fees and other matters.

This system is plain wrong. It is a disgrace. The only people that can fix it are the people who vote. This

year's town board election should be a referendum on whether the residents of Brookhaven want to continue with business as usual or put an end to the politicians putting their hands in the public's pocket.

The town board's position is frighteningly arrogant, particularly in light of the charges of scandal which have hung over Brookhaven during the past two years.

The voters have three choices. They can fail to register and not be able to vote. They can stay away from the polls affirming business as usual, or they can go to the polls and vote for those candidates who support competitive bidding. The right answer could well knock some dollars off your tax bill next year.

It's your money. Do you care?

And why not?

Campaign 1993: the issues

On November 2, Suffolk County residents who are registered to vote will have the opportunity to go to the polls and change history. Up for election are district attorney, sheriff, treasurer, 18 Suffolk County legislators, supervisors from all 10 towns, as well as councilpersons and a host of other candidates for highway superintendent, receiver of taxes, town clerks and judgeships.

In addition, there are a number of ballot proposals that should be given serious consideration.

The news and editorial staff at Suffolk Life have been following the candidates since they first announced their intentions to run last spring. We take government extremely seriously at this publication.

In May of this year we hosted and paid for a half-day seminar to which all candidates and their campaign staff were invited. The seminar provided these interested parties with the nuts and bolts information to determine their qualifications as candidates, the importance of being informed, the mechanics of fund-raising, staff building and how to do newspaper, radio, television and direct mail advertising.

Campaign coverage

As the campaign rolled on, our news pages have been filled with stories about the candidates and important developments with each campaign. Candidates for legislative or supervisory offices were provided the opportunity to present to the public their positions on over 100 issues that covered the gamut, including, the environment, spending, taxes, public employee wages, health, welfare and special interest items.

Candidates were asked to answer "yes" or "no." The answers were published for those seeking county office on October 6. On October 13, we published the answers for those seeking supervisor and town board seats. How the candidates answered the questions is telling. There are no right or wrong answers as each of you who read them will have your own answers. It is how the candidate answers match with your beliefs or philosophies that counts.

Those candidates who failed to answer specific questions are candidates to fear. They are denying you the opportunity to know how they would vote on those issues. They should not be trusted; they do not deserve your vote if the answer is important to you. This is a form of dishonesty. To us, this was and should be the most important aspect of this or any other campaign.

Too many citizens are disgusted with politicians and their political rhetoric. They have been lied to, cheated and misled by candidates who are running for offices from the lowest rung of the political ladder to President of the United States. Politics was once an honorable profession. A politician's word was his bond. He would go to his grave before he would go back on his philosophy, his beliefs and, particularly, his pledge to the public. Times, as we all know, have changed.

We still consider honesty one of the most important traits. In the process of trying to find the best candidates, we have tried to sift through the rhetoric to find those who are believable. We interviewed 104 candidates this year. Most interviews consisted of a half-hour private interview with the challenger, one hour in an informal debate between the challenger and the incumbent—head-to-head where issues were discussed—followed by a half-hour interview with the incumbent. The interviews were conducted by three to five people from the news staff and the editorial board.

The issues: the economy

No matter what anyone tries to tell you, the economy here in Suffolk County is still in tough shape. We have lost over 100,000 private sector jobs over the last few years. Businesses by the thousands

have closed and fled. New businesses are "few and far between" in showing interest in Long Island.

The primary reason is taxes. We have the highest real estate taxes in the regional area. Up to 70% of our real estate taxes go to fund schools. We spend just over \$12,000 on each child in school. This is more than 50% higher than the nation's norm. The children's education, for the most part, is only on par with the rest of the nation. The ratio of administrators to students is as much as 10 times higher than other districts throughout the state. Our class ratio is much smaller and the average cost of an educator is over \$60,000 per year, plus benefits.

The balance of the taxes (30%) imposed upon real estate is used to fund the police, the courts, recreation, parks and senior citizens programs, as well as the government itself. The towns operate almost solely on real estate taxes.

The county collects a great portion of its operating expenses from sales taxes, and a smaller portion, approximately 10%, of their entire budget from real estate taxes. Sales taxes are at 8.5%, much higher than most counties in the state and surrounding counties to New York. One percent of the 8.5% was sold to the public as a temporary sales tax needed to bail out the county because of past financial mistakes. This bailout will be completed on December 31, 1993. At the county executive's insistence, the Suffolk County Legislature continued this tax for an additional two years. This extension will produce a minimum of \$37.5 million in non-encumbered revenues per year. It can be used to reduce real estate taxes, to expand and grow government, or it can be used to increase wages of county employees. Of course, if the tax is used, there is no hope it can be rescinded when it is supposed to expire at the end of 1995.

During the last three to four years, the county has had deep financial problems. Bankruptcy was only avoided by imposing higher real estate taxes and the increase in the sales tax. The problem was created on two fronts. Former County Executive Patrick Halpin, when faced with a faltering economy, projected unrealistic increases in sales tax revenues which did not come to pass. The county, under both county executives, increased spending. They did little to control the cost of doing business.

The county work force

The county executives did impose punitive measures on the work force. They forced the county workers to lag one payroll. They furloughed some employees and laid off a few others. Most county workers have been without a contract for two to four years. Some unions continued to receive increases due to previously-negotiated step increases that kept increasing their salaries even though their contracts had expired. Other unions have had no increases because when the contract expired, so did the step mechanism.

Although there is virtually no new money coming into the county, the unions are becoming more and more aggressive in their demands for large salary increases. It has been reported that the county has offered increases, including steps, that reflect the cost of living, but no more. But the unions want more.

The union contracts

Once a contract has been negotiated between the county executive and the unions, it must go to the county legislature for ratification. The legislature has the reputation of taking the path of least resistance and not standing up and fighting for the taxpayer. While the county's spending is, by legislation, capped at 4%, the legislature can, with 14 votes, pierce this cap and drive spending higher. We spent an inordinate amount of time with the candidates trying to ascertain their feelings on increases, asking if they had any firm feelings on limitations that they would accept. We feel it is important for the public to know before they make their decision about who will best represent them.

As interested as we were about taxes and contracts, we were equally as interested to know the approach that the candidate would take to control both mandated and discretionary spending. In today's world of rhetoric and dishonesty, there is a fine line between what is actually mandated and what someone interprets as being mandated. It is all too easy for skilled politicians to make a case that they are only following an order or law, when in actuality, possessed with courage, they could say "no" and be responsible for their actions.

Robins Is., environment

The picture on the environment is becoming more clear-cut. We can protect the environment through compromise. We cannot protect the environment through an all or nothing approach. Robins Island crystallized this. The all or nothing people want Robins Island bought lock, stock and barrel. They don't mind spending an estimated \$20 million in principal and interest, and an additional \$20 million to \$30 million over the life of the bonds and the lost taxes and maintenance cost of the island. They would prefer to have the taxpayers of Suffolk County incur this expenditure rather than allow development on 7.5% of the island, with the balance of the island maintained as a preserve and a taxpayer, free of any taxpayer investment.

The Robins Island issue makes it crystal clear you can have your lunch and eat it too, if you use common sense. It is this approach that would allow the county to acquire other vast tracts of land and have the money to do it, land that may be more sensitive to water and ecologically more desirable. If you spend all your money in one spot, you won't have it to spread around.

Readers will find answers to these questions and many more by reviewing the questionnaire. You can find out with some certainty where each candidate stands. There are no right or wrong answers on the questions. Each of us believes differently on different things.

Do you get it?

Invest the half-hour it will take you to read through the questionnaire. Answer each of the questions the way you believe, then go back over the questions, find the candidates who represent your district or your town and compare the candidates' answers to your own. You will have a good idea who you should support and who you should vote against. To make it easier, use a color highlighter to make your district stand out for comparison.

Government is of growing importance to each of us. Our elected officials make new rules and regulations governing our everyday lives. They make choices on how much of our money they will spend and how much of our money they will take in taxes to pay for their spending.

You are the only person that can make a difference and the difference is your participation in the system and your vote on November 2. We have done our part to try to bring you a clear and concise picture. Please do yours, read the questionnaires, come to your own conclusions. Next week in our endorsements we will give you ours.

And why not?

★ **Vote** ★
★ **Nov 2nd** ★