

# WILLMOTTS & WHY NOTS

DAVID J. WILLMOTT SR., EDITOR

## Living Up to Obligations

The state and county governments have been taking huge chunks of land off the tax rolls. In the communities where this takes place, the tax burden is shifted from the owners of such properties to the remaining taxpayers. In the Flanders portion of Riverhead school district, government owns 90% of the land and pays no taxes while the owners of the remaining 10%, held mostly by private homeowners, are left to carry the burden for the entire district.

In the Town of Riverhead, more than 50% of the land is off the tax rolls because of agricultural exemptions, open space, farmland preservation districts and properties controlled by the Pine Barrens Commit-

tee, churches and nonprofit organizations. Riverhead is not a wealthy community, yet its residents pay a disproportionate share of real estate taxes.

Our county, state and federal officials must seriously take into consideration the impact this tax policy has on its residents. The town, county and state governments

must find a revenue source to reimburse the municipal governments for the lost revenue. This is only fair and equitable and should be calculated into the funds used to purchase these lands.

We congratulate Brookhaven National Lab for leading the way. We hope it is permanent and not just a one-shot public relations gimmick. If the lab and the federal government can accept their responsibilities, so should the county and state.

And why not?



## Going to Extremes

September 22 was Suffolk Life night at the Patchogue Theater. "Titanic" was presented by the Gateway Playhouse at this newly renovated former movie theater.

As we sat in the audience and watched this grand performance, we noticed that, in their roles, some of the actors were smoking. This was part of the play. Gateway had done its darndest to recreate this Broadway hit, which had a similar scene. As our cynical mind raced ahead, we thought about Suffolk's anti-smoking ordinance and we bet ourselves that someone was going to complain about smoking in public because of the dangers of second hand smoke.

Lo and behold, we have learned the Suffolk County Department of Health has jumped on the theater company for allowing smoking in a public building. The Health Department has ordered Gateway to either

eliminate the smoking scene or not to allow the actors to light up.

Gateway's Executive Director John Hogge blasted the health department for infringing upon the theater's right of free speech. "These scenes are part of the Broadway play and should not and will not be edited out."

We agree with Hogge. The minimal amount of smoke produced is not going to affect anyone and it is stupid to be making a scene about this. Doesn't the health department have better things to do with its time?

This is going to be an interesting fight as it pits bureaucratic nitpicking against the First Amendment and freedom of expression. When the smoke clears, we hope that Hogge will have won for the right reasons.

And why not?

## Suffolk's Embarrassment

Suffolk County has often been described as the Wild West of politics. Regrettably, it is getting to be an embarrassment.

Patrick Mahoney was elected sheriff on the Republican line — the same party line shared by County Executive Robert Gaffney. Mahoney persistently has had problems in staffing and managing the sheriff's department because of labor negotiations conducted by Gaffney's negotiator on the sheriff's behalf.

After many meetings between Gaffney and Mahoney, Mahoney left the Republican Party, became a Democrat and is now challenging Gaffney for county executive.

Into the fray comes Republican District Attorney James Catterson, Jr., who has a reputation for using his office for political retribution. He convened a grand jury to investigate the sheriff's department. On its face this was suspect, considering the Mahoney-Gaffney match up.

Last week, the district attorney's office showed up at Mahoney's office with seven investigators and a search warrant. They took several files, a list of contributors and other personal property belonging to the

sheriff. The timing and the political consequences are a little too much for us to stomach.

The day before this incident, Mahoney sent a letter to Elliot Spitzer, the New York State attorney general, asking him to appoint an independent prosecutor free of Suffolk politics. This is a bold step made out of desperation.

Mahoney indicated he would prefer to be investigated by a tougher and more professional, but nonpartisan, persecutor. He said more than 500 campaign contributors had been interviewed by Catterson's office and campaign workers had been intimidated. Mahoney believes the investigation is purely political and designed to interrupt his campaign for county executive.

The situation has obviously gotten out of hand. The Suffolk County district attorney cannot be objective. It is time for the New York state attorney general to step in. If there is any corruption in the sheriff's department, let it be weeded out and let Mahoney take his lumps. If this is nothing more than a political witch hunt, it should be ended and Catterson should be reprimanded.

And why not?

## We Salute Our Fire Fighters

Each year, the councils of Suffolk Fire Fighters gather to select and honor members who have gone beyond the call of duty. This year, the honorees were recognized and given their awards at a ceremony held in Central Islip. These men and women were named the best of the best; they are people who disregarded their own safety to save others. We believe every fire fighter should be commended.

Being a fire fighter is one of the highest callings a civilian can have. Every fire fighter goes through hours of extensive training.

They are expected to respond any hour of the day or night, and do not know who they are volunteering to help, whether friend or foe, Christian or Jew, White or Black. Nothing matters except that someone or some property is in need. They are volunteers who are trained to respond.

We commend this year's volunteers. You have earned the public's acknowledgment. To every fire fighter out there we say "Thanks!" All of us appreciate the service you provide for us.

And why not?

## And Then The Rain Came

We actually enjoy rain. We appreciate the fact that without it we have drought and all the ills that the lack of adequate water brings.

Over the last couple of years, when we have been washing our boat, we have noted numerous stubborn stains in the fiberglass. A fellow boater, who has somewhat of a scientific background, said they were caused by acid rain. We had never before paid much attention to this phenomenon or its cause.

This incident forced us to recall that a couple of years back, we had a rather lengthy discussion with former Senator Alfonse D'Amato who said that acid rain is caused by the utilities with their huge smoke stacks in the Midwest. He intended to address acid rain and bring about federal regulations that would force the utilities

to clean up their act. He mentioned some of the areas upstate that had been hard hit and said that because of their neglect, the Midwest states are responsible for what happens in New York. Midwest utilities must be federally regulated.

D'Amato lost his reelection bid and we thought the cause might die. We are happy to note that New York Attorney General Elliot Spitzer intends to sue the Midwest utilities to stop them from polluting New York. We congratulate Spitzer on this move and encourage Senator Charles Schumer, who ousted D'Amato, to pick up the cause.

Newly minted Democratic Congressman Michael Forbes could improve his environmental record by leading the congressional charge.

And why not?

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## More Smoke and Mirrors

County Executive Gaffney's preliminary budget is filled with smoke and mirrors. Two items stand out as frightening. Gaffney and company intend to use the settlement money from the tobacco suit to shore up the budget. The money is coming from a proposed settlement by the cigarette companies. Although they agreed to the settlement, they are now balking at the deal. The fact is, the money does not yet exist. The politicians have put blinders on and are planning on spending this money as general government revenues. Tobacco settlement money is supposed to be earmarked for health and medical claims arising from cigarette use.

Gaffney is carrying this dangerous

precedent one step further in that he plans to use not only the first year's money, but half of next year's as well in this year's budget. Gaffney does not even have the money in hand, yet he is willing to freely spend it.

His second instance of fiscal mismanagement is that he is dipping into the general fund to shore up the Suffolk County Police District, which covers the five West End towns. It is a self-supporting district that general funds should not be used for. This is a very dangerous precedent as the county loses every argument it has in negotia-

tions when it claims the taxpayers cannot fund the settlement. Once the county establishes the precedent that it can go beyond real estate taxes to fund the police district, the lid is taken off of the caps and taxpayers can expect to be abused with impunity.

By law, the police district was to be funded out of real estate taxes and paid by those homeowners and businesses within the police district's service area.

There were no provisions for contributions to be made from the general fund, which belongs to all ten towns. The five East End towns maintain their own police forces, yet they are charged for 25% of the administrative costs of the Suffolk County Police District. This in itself is preposterous and should be corrected.

Under no circumstances should Gaffney be allowed to raid the general fund for the police district. The legislature should stop him cold in his tracks.

And why not?

## In Perspective

Last week we ran a story on the proposed increases in compensation for the directors of the Suffolk County Water Authority (SCWA). These directors are paid an annual stipend of \$7,500. Michael LoGrande, chairman of the SCWA, has requested that the directors' stipend be increased to \$18,700. This comes out to a raise of \$11,200. The raw increase can be alarming unless you consider the directors have not had their stipend increased since the early seventies.

The directors run the SCWA, a \$110 million enterprise. The cumulative raise proposed for all the directors is less than \$50,000. Under the tutelage of Chairman LoGrande the SCWA has been streamlined, patronage has been eliminated and service has been expanded. Rates have been kept down even though the SCWA has gone through a massive capital improvement program.

Directors of private corporations the size of the SCWA normally receive compensation packages that are worth hundreds of thousands of

dollars each year. The \$18,700 annual compensation requested for the directors is a pittance in comparison. There are part-time laborers in Suffolk County who earn more than \$7,500.

The directors have the full responsibility of keeping the SCWA running smoothly, insuring the water quality is safe while supplying the maximum number of Suffolk County residents. The SCWA has run well under LoGrande's leadership because he has been able to put together a highly talented board that has been free from political influence.

LoGrande will be retiring at the end of this year after a lifetime of service to the people of Suffolk County. He will be missed and the directors will have a difficult job finding someone of his caliber to fill his shoes.

Although a \$11,200 increase at first blush may seem excessive, it is not. Perhaps, it should be higher to ensure that we continue to have the same quality of people serving on the SCWA board.

And why not?

## More Plutonium in the Peconic

Disturbingly, more plutonium than anyone thought existed was found in the bottom muck in the Peconic River. It is one of the most deadly radioactive elements and was first found in the Peconic River almost two years ago during routine testing.

The head waters of the Peconic flow through Brookhaven National Lab. Supporters of the lab claim the plutonium in the Peconic and other rivers came from nuclear testing being done in other countries. However, the plutonium amount in the Peconic River is twice that found in other rivers. It is suspected that the plutonium may have found its way into the river from

the lab's sewage plant.

The lab is currently undergoing rehabilitation procedures that have been criticized by activist groups as being too little and too late. The presence of plutonium in the river bed of the Peconic must be addressed as the river feeds Peconic Bay and is connected to Shinnecock Bay, the Long Island Sound and the ocean.

Brookhaven National Laboratory is a federal installation and darn well warrants the attention of Congressman Mike Forbes, Senator Charles Schumer and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

And why not?



"THE GOP TAX CUT PLAN IS MEAN-SPIRITED AND COMPASSIONLESS!... NOW, GIVE US YOUR MONEY BEFORE MY FRIEND HERE GETS UPSET!!"

## Turn Clocks Back, Check Alarms

On Sunday, October 31, we celebrate Halloween and also the end of daylight saving time. It is recommended that when you turn the clock back, you check the batteries in your fire alarms.

A fire alarm with a dead battery does not offer any protection and actually lulls you into a false sense of security. Most fire alarms operate on a transistor battery if they are not hard wired. It is a good procedure to change the battery every six months just to be on the safe side. If the battery still appears to have a charge, use it in some nonessential appliance. Put a fresh one in the fire alarm.

As the 31st is on a Sunday, this gives all families an ideal opportuni-

ty to review their escape procedures in case of a fire before the tricking and treating starts. If you do not have a planned procedure, lay one out now and go one step further by holding a fire drill. The planning and precautions you take today can save your lives in case of a fire.

We particularly encourage families with children and senior citizens to go through this exercise. Seniors, like teenagers, often consider themselves invulnerable and think they have lived long enough to avoid danger. That is just not reality, particularly if a senior has a disability or infirmity.

Plan for the worst. Play safe. And why not?