



Assemblyman

Steve Otis



Community Update

Fall 2014

Dear Friends,

I am writing to update you on some of the highlights of the 2014 Legislative Session and my work representing you in the State Assembly.

Priority issues for the communities I serve focus on state efforts to improve the quality of education in our schools, lessen the tax burden on New Yorkers, help small businesses, bolster our economy and increase jobs. In addition to these statewide issues, I have worked closely with local governments on the challenges facing our communities and have been able to pass important legislation to address concerns that many of you have brought to my attention.

My goal is to be effective on all of these fronts. I am very pleased with the increases in state aid to Westchester schools in 2013 and 2014. Those increases, combined with a variety of other tax relief measures, will help address the tax burden in New York. As a new member of the Assembly, I was able to sponsor and pass a number of substantive pieces of legislation and have them signed into law.

The best ideas for legislation often come from problems we face in our daily lives. My office is available to help you with individual issues you may have with state agencies or other entities. Those issues may also offer ideas for changes in the law. Please feel free to call my district office at 914-939-7028, if I may be of assistance.

My emphasis will continue to be on the concerns facing Westchester residents. Thank you for the opportunity to serve and to work with you on many of these concerns.

Warm regards,

STATE AID INCREASES TO SOUND SHORE SCHOOL DISTRICTS

I am pleased to report that after years of decreasing state aid to local school districts, the 2014 state budget brought a second consecutive year of major increases in aid to Westchester school districts. This school aid package was the largest since before the recession and will help to maintain the quality educational programming that our school districts have worked so hard to provide.

Advocating for more state aid for Westchester schools was a major priority of mine during the budget process, and I worked closely with the entire Westchester Delegation to push for fair treatment of suburban school districts. With tightening school budgets and pressure on the property tax levy, state support for suburban school districts is especially important.

I applaud the Governor's prioritization of education spending, which resulted in a statewide increase of \$1.1 billion in aid to New York school districts. Westchester's 40 school districts received an increase of \$56 million, which is \$19.4 million more than was originally proposed by the Governor in January. Each of the school districts I represent received increases of more than \$100,000 over last year's state aid. Typically, aid was increased through additions in foundation aid, high tax aid, and GAP restoration. The additions were negotiated with the support of the Governor as part of the budget process.

Protecting taxpayers and preserving quality education in Westchester can only be accomplished if state aid better reflects the needs of our communities. This year's budget is a step in the right direction.

TAX RELIEF IN THE STATE BUDGET

The state budget included tax relief provisions for homeowners and businesses intended to reduce the property tax burden, while increasing jobs and promoting economic growth.

The budget will continue the STAR property tax relief program, worth over \$3.4 billion in tax exemptions for homeowners. An increase of more than \$1.5 billion in property tax relief will be phased-in over the next three years. In addition, the state's cap on county Medicaid costs will result in \$1.9 billion of property tax costs shifting back to the state by 2018. The local share of Medic-

aid charged to counties and New York City totaled \$7.5 billion in 2012-13. We need to continue to reduce this number by decreasing Medicaid costs and shifting the local share away from the property tax completely.

Tax cuts for businesses included a reduction in the corporate income tax rate and elimination of the corporate tax on manufacturing. The budget also included a property tax credit for manufacturing. In addition, the energy surcharge on business was reduced, which will save companies more than \$100 million over the next three years.

Girl Scout Anna-Kay Smickel shows Assemblyman Otis the information kiosk she designed for the Town of Rye African American Civil War Cemetery during a Memorial Day ceremony to honor those buried there.

Anna completed the kiosk as part of her Silver Star scouting project. The project provides details about the individuals and families buried in the historic cemetery.



Assemblyman Otis questions MTA Chairman/ CEO Thomas Prendergast about serious reliability concerns with the New Haven Metro North railroad line during a Transportation budget hearing. Assemblyman Otis has been critical of Metro North over the dramatic decline in performance and service on the New Haven line.



ONGOING POLICY CONCERNS IN EDUCATION

Education policy around the state and across the country has been the focus of controversy and change for a number of years. In the Assembly, I have been active in communicating the concerns of students, parents, teachers and school boards about these issues. An important part of my job is to protect the things that work successfully in our school districts from changes that, while intended to fix statewide problems, may actually diminish the educational programming that we offer.

Education policy in New York State is primarily under the control of the Board of Regents, not the Legislature or the Governor. Given the issues before our schools today and widespread concerns surrounding the rollout of Common Core and other testing requirements, the Legislature and the Governor have stepped in to play a larger role and to communicate our concerns to the Board of Regents.

To that end, I advocated for and co-sponsored legislation to address the flawed implementation of the Common Core program and to make sure that students are not adversely affected by the hastily adopted assessments. Our legislative reforms, which have

been signed into law by the Governor, ban Common Core testing for grades K-2 and prohibit the use of state test scores to determine student promotion in grades 3-8. The reforms also protect the security and privacy of student data. In addition, we have cancelled the State Education Department's plan to outsource student data to a single national vendor.

I am committed to addressing the concerns of everyone involved in education regarding the Common Core, the preponderance of testing and teacher evaluations. I believe that schools today rely so heavily on testing that critical time available for teaching has been significantly reduced. We risk a classroom where teaching is becoming secondary to testing in time and focus.

Ultimately, our schools need increased state resources to deliver quality education. In the present environment, we cannot rely so heavily on property taxes to fund education. Further increases in state assistance are necessary to ensure educational excellence and to provide our children with the tools they need for success in college and beyond.

SMART SCHOOLS BOND ISSUE ON BALLOT IN NOVEMBER

To provide for technology upgrades in the schools without adding to the existing property tax burden, the Governor has proposed a Smart Schools Bond Issue, which will be on the ballot in the November election. The \$2 billion statewide bond issue would provide state funds for school districts to upgrade computers, high speed broadband and other classroom technol-

ogy needs. The allocation of the \$2 billion has already been determined if the bond issue were to be approved by the voters. Westchester schools would receive \$61.7 million in technology assistance and each school district in the 91st Assembly district would receive funding through this program.

SAFEGUARDING AIRCRAFT FROM LASER BEAM INTERFERENCE

There has been a huge increase in laser pointer incidents nationwide, from an estimated 280 in 2005 to more than 3,800 in 2013. I sponsored legislation that has been signed into law by the Governor, which makes it a crime to interfere with an aircraft by shining a laser pointer beam at an airplane or in its flight path. The intense and focused light of a laser can temporarily blind a pilot or impair his or her night vision. Given that laser incidents originate from a person on the ground, pilots usually experience these dangerous situations during critical and difficult operations, such as takeoffs or landings. This endangers the lives of pilots, passengers and people on the ground.

These actions have been illegal under federal law since 2012. By granting local law enforcement the ability to prosecute offenders, we will help to ensure that all New York airports and the traveling public are protected, while restoring public confidence in the safety of airline travel.

NEW ROCHELLE AND LARCHMONT LIBRARIES AWARDED STATE CONSTRUCTION GRANTS

Local property taxpayers will not have to bear the costs of much-needed infrastructure improvements at the Larchmont and New Rochelle public libraries thanks to state grants awarded to both libraries. The Larchmont Library received \$49,969 for the renovation of its roof, while the New Rochelle Library System received \$11,625 to install interior task lighting and storage at the cellar level of its Huguenot Children's Library. The grants came from capital funds set aside in the 2013 state budget specifically for public library construction projects. With library usage on the rise, these state grants are vital to ensuring that our public libraries can continue to improve their facilities and remain safe, efficient and inviting places for the public to enjoy. As a member of the Assembly Committee on Libraries and Education Technology, I worked for library funding in the state budget and am pleased that these grants are available for our libraries.

PROTECTING CONSUMERS FROM UNSCRUPULOUS TELEMARKETING PRACTICES BY ENERGY SERVICE COMPANIES

Every day, New York consumers are inundated with unwanted, and in many cases, untruthful solicitation calls from energy services companies, known as ESCOs. These are the companies that solicit your business to supply energy as an alternative to Con Ed. I sponsored legislation that has passed both houses, which would establish marketing rules for these

companies and stop unwanted repeated phone calls. ESCOs often do not comply with the national do-not-call registry. My bill would require that they respect a consumer's desire to opt out of these phone calls. It will also protect consumers from deceptive marketing practices, often targeted at senior citizens, by these companies.

INCREASING THE PENALTIES FOR PET THEFTS

Thefts of pets and companion animals are growing in frequency, yet the penalties for such crimes have not increased in over 40 years. I sponsored a bill, which is now law, to increase the penalty for stealing a household pet from \$200 to \$1,000, with a possible prison term of six months. Stolen animals are often resold to unsuspecting families, research facilities and puppy mills, or used as bait for fighting dogs. By substantially increasing the penalties, my hope is that we will deter criminals from engaging in this heinous conduct and spare families the devastation that comes from the loss of a beloved pet.

I have long been an advocate for laws supporting the humane treatment of animals, and this year I helped to secure passage of several bills that crack down on the abusive treatment of animals in New York State. I supported legislation to improve local regulation of pet dealers that was signed into law this year, as well as a bill to prohibit the cosmetic piercing and tattooing of animals, which passed the Legislature in June.



Assemblyman Otis with other legislators and their pets at the Animal Advocacy Day Press Conference in Albany to fight for tougher laws protecting animals, including his own bill that increased the criminal penalties for stealing pets.

PREVENTING DEVASTATING INJURIES FROM IMPROPERLY SECURED SOCCER GOALS

Hundreds of children in the United States are seriously injured or even killed by improperly secured soccer goals each year. Soccer goals are top-heavy and if not properly secured, often fall and cause serious injury. In 2002, an 8-year-old girl from Rye Brook suffered a crushed femur when a portable goal was blown over by a gust of wind. Though she eventually made a full recovery, others have not been so lucky. There is at least one fatality a year nationwide from these easily preventable accidents.

Legislation I sponsored to mandate compliance with nationally recognized standards for securing soccer goals passed both houses of the legislature this year. Although the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission has issued guidelines that serve as “best practices” for soccer goal safety, those standards of care have unfortunately been viewed as optional by many entities running soccer programs.

As this year’s World Cup competition highlighted, soccer is an immensely popular sport to play and to watch. My hope is that by adhering to these guidelines and raising awareness of this issue, we can avert future tragedies on our soccer fields.

STORM PREPAREDNESS AND RECOVERY

The Governor has made storm preparedness and recovery a priority of state government at a level unprecedented in recent memory. In the aftermath of Irene and Lee in 2011, Sandy in 2012 and a number of more localized natural disasters in recent years, New York has significantly upgraded our state government’s ability to provide resources and assistance after a disaster.

The larger goal is to reduce our vulnerability through better decision-making during reconstruction. New York has leveraged over \$30 billion in federal emergency assistance to assist with community preparedness and mitigation projects, housing recovery efforts, buyouts of severely damaged properties in highly vulnerable locations and help for small businesses.

The state has also increased its oversight of public utilities and their storm preparedness, provided generators to gas stations, created gas reserves for first responders and advanced a number of other programs to increase training, protect the electrical grid and make our state more resilient and better prepared for natural disasters.

I have been a staunch advocate for all of these efforts. I also co-sponsored legislation to require that government planning initiatives consider the effects of storm damage and climate change in the planning process. Better rebuilding includes making sure that key facilities are not placed in storm-vulnerable locations. This type of analysis should be standard operating procedure. I am pleased that this legislation, which is based upon hearings we held in 2013, passed both houses of the legislature this year.

STATE AND LOCAL EFFORTS TO SUPPORT NY BUSINESSES

A major economic goal of mine is to support local businesses and raise awareness of the importance of “Buying Local.” Our independent retailers are more than just local providers of goods and services. Their success is vital to the communities where we live. They create jobs, offer important services and are part of our civic and cultural life. Last year, I hosted a small business

conference promoting the Buy Local theme, and I work closely with local Chambers of Commerce throughout the year.

The Governor has been a strong advocate of the Buy Local concept at the state level and has achieved considerable success promoting New York businesses, including the tourism, dairy, yogurt, wine, beer and spirits industries. Taste NY, a new initiative by the Governor and the Legislature, will further highlight New York food and beverage products at special events, tourism destinations and stores throughout the state. Small stores selling Taste NY products are now open in four major New York airports and in a handful of locations along the New York State Thruway. This coming year, a Taste NY location will open at Grand Central Station and a new marketing and branding program will highlight New York State wines in liquor stores. Taste NY stores sell local dairy products, fruits and vegetables, wine, beer, cider, maple and other specialty products. These stores are an excellent way to support our local economy and get a taste of all the great food and drink that New York State has to offer. I was an Assembly co-sponsor of the Taste NY program.



Assemblyman Otis helps celebrate the opening of the Trilogy Bake Shop in New Rochelle. Otis joins owners Vincent Burns and Betsy Ogando (center) and pastry chef Jessica Pollack, as well as local Chamber of Commerce and City officials at the ribbon cutting for this new business in downtown New Rochelle. Trilogy Bake Shop is located at 679 Main Street.

EXPANDING BUSINESS AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR VETERANS

Over 900,000 New Yorkers are veterans, of which over 88,000 have served in Iraq or Afghanistan. More than 72% of New York veterans have served in combat. Unfortunately, employment and business opportunities for veterans lag behind the state average. I fought for and co-sponsored two bills aimed at improving employment opportunities for veterans and am pleased to report that both have been signed into law this year.

In January, the Governor signed legislation that requires state agencies to develop and utilize a list of veterans to fill temporary staffing needs. This measure will give veterans the opportunity to fill positions as they become available, rather than defaulting to temporary staffing agencies.

In May, the Governor signed the Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Business Act, which will expand state contracting opportunities for businesses owned by service-disabled veterans. New York State ranks fourth in the nation for the number of veteran-owned small businesses, but returning veterans often struggle to reintegrate themselves and their businesses into our economy. By working towards a 6% goal in the awarding of state contracts to veteran-owned businesses, the new law will make sure that veterans are given every opportunity to compete for state contracts.

OTIS HOSTS SMALL BUSINESS CONFERENCE FOCUSING ON CYBER SECURITY AND PROTECTION OF CUSTOMER DATA

The recent security breaches at Target and other large retailers have exposed the need to protect sensitive customer data from potential hacking and theft. But while large, high profile companies might be considered prime targets for cyber thieves, the vast majority of security breaches occur at small businesses. More than 70% of all data breaches impact small retailers, restaurants and businesses, which may be least equipped to protect against an attack.

For this reason, my annual **Small Business and Economic Development Forum**, which is co-sponsored by the Women's Enterprise Development Center (WEDC) will focus this year on the issue of cyber security. Industry and security experts will present practical, proactive and cost-effective strategies that can help small business owners better safeguard sensitive business and customer data.

The Small Business conference will be held on Tuesday, October 21st from 8:30-10:30 a.m. at the Mamaroneck Town Center, 740 Boston Post Road, Mamaroneck. As in the past, state agency representatives and business organizations will be on hand to answer questions and provide one-on-one assistance on a wide variety of topics. For more information, please contact my district office.

NEW YORK LEGALIZES THE USE OF MEDICAL MARIJUANA

After lengthy negotiations between the Governor and the Legislature, New York State has enacted legislation to allow the use of medical marijuana under limited circumstances. New York becomes the 23rd state, along with the District of Columbia, to allow use of the drug for medical purposes.

Individuals should not have to choose between breaking the law and getting the pain relief they or their loved ones desperately need. This bill would allow doctors to prescribe medical marijuana

to treat certain debilitating and life-threatening illnesses. The bill contains numerous safeguards and strict penalties to ensure that only those with a medical need specified in the law can use the drug. For example, the prescribed drug will not be made available in a form that can be smoked. The law will take effect in 18 months to allow sufficient time to set up the program. It will expire, absent reauthorization, after seven years.



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Legislation Online

The text and status of bills, along with the sponsors' memos, are available online through the State Assembly website at www.assembly.state.ny.us. Copies of bills and supporting documents for legislation are also always available by contacting my District Office at 939-7028.

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