



## Clean water initiative

Proposed sales tax increase to combat pollution

**A7**



## Inside

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# Scratch and claw

**Cougars and Tigers battle to the finish in League II grudge match — A10**

Evan Kay and Brendan Fenlon try for loose ball in Commack's 44-41 victory on Feb. 2. Photo by Steven Zaitz

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# Rally against proposed education cuts

BY SAMANTHA RUTT  
EDITOR1@TBRNEWSMEDIA.COM

Elected officials from across Long Island joined forces in a rally Feb. 1 held on the front lawn of Ward Melville High School. A diverse crowd of educators, students, parents, concerned citizens and community figures gathered for the event, lining Old Town Road with signage reading “Save Our School\$,” as officials vehemently spoke in opposition to the proposed cuts to education funding outlined in the latest state budget proposal.

The proposed cuts, part of a broader state budget plan aiming to address fiscal challenges, have sparked widespread concern among education advocates and community members. Long Island officials, representing various districts and political affiliations, united in their stance against these reductions, emphasizing the detrimental impact they would have on the region’s schools and students.

New York State Sens. Anthony Palumbo (R-New Suffolk) and Mario Mattera (R-St. James), along with state Assemblymembers Ed Flood (R-Port Jefferson), Jodi Giglio (R-Riverhead) and Port Jefferson Deputy Mayor Rebecca Kassay (D) all stood before the podium expressing their respective concerns.

“Governor Hochul’s proposed budget is a choice to underfund our schools, and it’s shameful,” Palumbo said. “We’re here to bring attention to that. This is critical. This is absolutely important.”

Palumbo, who represents New York Senate District 1, spanning from Stony Brook to Montauk, opened the rally addressing the financial consequences of the proposal on his district.

“The governor’s proposed budget cuts state aid by \$168 million, affecting 337 school districts statewide,” Palumbo said. “My district, Senate District 1, around 330,000 people, stands to lose \$20,025,000 if the governor’s budget is adopted. And where we’re standing here in Three Village, they stand to lose \$8.9 million in funding.”

Three Village Central School District is among the many school districts to be affected by the budget proposal, experiencing the highest values lost in aid. Among the other districts to be affected are Port Jefferson School District standing the potential to be hit by the largest percentage of funding loss on Long Island at over 28%. Mount Sinai, Cold Spring Harbor, Smithtown and Kings Park school districts also stand to be negatively affected by the proposal.

## Concerns for education quality and job loss

The rally highlighted the importance of adequate funding for schools in ensuring the quality of education and opportunities for all students. Flood spoke to his concerns for the quality of education students would receive suggesting programs, extracurricular activities and staff would have to be cut as a consequence of the proposed cuts to education funding.

“It’s disgraceful that we’re talking about having to cut budgets, in terms of cutting buildings, cutting programs, cutting staff and faculty,”



From left, Rebecca Kassay, Senator Anthony Palumbo, Assemblywoman Jodi Giglio, Senator Mario Mattera, Assemblyman Ed Flood and high school students rally against proposed education cuts. Photo by Samantha Rutt

Flood said. “We as people, teachers and school employees have our own families and right now to play politics with the lives of our students and our workforce is just shameful.”

Cuts to education funding can have a multifaceted impact that can undermine the quality of education by diminishing resources, increasing class sizes, reducing extracurricular opportunities and straining the workforce, ultimately impeding students’ academic success and holistic development.

Echoing Flood’s sentiments, Mattera highlighted the direct consequences of reduced funding on classroom resources and student support services. “All the workers that are inside, our custodians, everybody, our security officers have a chance of losing their jobs. Does anybody want to lose their jobs? No,” Mattera emphasized. “You know what, our governor is making sure that this is going to happen.”

The rally also featured testimonials from parents who shared personal stories illustrating the impact of education funding on their lives. Kristen Girona, a member of the Three Village PTA Council board, spoke about the challenges students may face and the critical role of adequate funding in addressing those obstacles. “We rely heavily on Foundation Aid for the success of our current and future students,” Girona said. “Cutting this money from the current budget would be detrimental to the future of our students, their education and the opportunity that we can continue to provide them with.”

Students were also present at the rally, donning signs and standing alongside the officials as cars driving past honked their horns in reaction to the public event.

After all other officials spoke, Kassay concluded, “We must work together as a full district to make sure that as changes need to be made and that they’re made with the voices of the people standing here, the voices of the school behind us, and all the schools in the area to make sure that the changes are incremental, not straining taxpayers and not sacrificing jobs.”

As the rally came to a close, elected officials pledged to continue advocating for increased education funding and urged community members to join them in their efforts urging everyone to “Get vocal with Governor Hochul!”

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# Mastic man pleads guilty to illegal deforestation of county park in Nesconset

Suffolk County District Attorney Raymond A. Tierney announced on Feb. 2 that Terence Wolffe, 42, of Mastic, pleaded guilty to Criminal Mischief in the Fourth Degree and related charges for intentionally damaging parkland in the undeveloped wilderness of Walter S. Commerdinger Jr. County Park in Nesconset.



Terence Wolffe

According to court documents and the defendant's statements during his plea allocution, Wolffe damaged county parkland within the confines of Walter S. Commerdinger Jr. County Park. Beginning in April 2023, Wolffe travelled to an off-trail area in the interior of the park to clear and excavate a personal "hang-out" spot in the woods. Using machetes, axes, and shovels, Wolffe chopped down native trees, removed native vegetation, and dug up ground-brush, thatch, soil, dirt and earth from an area approximately 1,150 square feet in dimension. Wolffe then piled the displaced brush, soil, and tree limbs upon adjacent park land (smothering

other native vegetation). While some trees around the periphery were left standing, Wolffe had allegedly hacked and sectioned their roots, causing severe and fatal damage that, in turn, jeopardized those on trails from falling timber. The depth of Wolffe's excavation caused the adjacent wetland to flood into the pit. Wolffe's conduct was detected in November 2023 by Suffolk County Park Rangers. He was confronted at the scene and ultimately arrested on Dec. 5, 2023, after a full site investigation was completed. He was also cited for having a machete on county parklands. He is now mandated to contribute socially, physically, and financially towards the county's efforts to improve the environment under the "Evergreen Initiative." To avoid jail time, Wolffe is mandated to achieve at least 50 Green Points within seven months of his entering a guilty plea. Wolffe then must acquire any outstanding points within six months of his sentencing. Any unearned points will convert to jail-time. Additionally, Wolffe will also have to file monthly reports to the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office on his progress and submit a personal statement describing, at a minimum, his experiences in undertaking the activities.

—SUFFOLK COUNTY D.A.'S OFFICE

# POLICE BLOTTER

The following incidents have been reported by Suffolk County Police:

## Man killed in Ronkonkoma crash

Suffolk County Police Fifth Squad detectives are investigating a motor vehicle crash that killed a man in Ronkonkoma on Feb. 1. Adelino Santiago was driving his 1996 Ford F-350 pickup truck traveling northbound on Smithtown Avenue when the vehicle struck the curb and flipped several times. Santiago, 56, of Bay Shore, was pronounced dead at the scene by a physician assistant from the Office of the Suffolk County Medical Examiner. Anyone with information on this crash is asked to call Fifth Squad detectives at 631-854-8552.

## Man found dead in Central Islip

Suffolk County Crime Stoppers and Suffolk County Police Homicide Squad detectives are seeking the public's help to identify and locate the person or people who are responsible for the death of a Central Islip man.



Marco Tulio Pineda

Police responded to a residence on 2nd Avenue in Central Islip on February 1 at approximately 12:50 p.m. after an acquaintance of Marco Tulio Pineda called 911 to report they located him deceased in the rear yard of the location. After an autopsy was performed, it was determined Pineda was a victim of a homicide. Pineda, 51, worked as a flooring installer and frequented businesses on Suffolk Avenue in Central Islip. Anyone with information on this case is asked to call 1-800-220-TIPS.

## Man arrested for forcible touching

Suffolk County Police arrested a Huntington Station man on Feb. 3 for allegedly forcibly touching a woman at Target in Commack in November of last year. A 72-year-old woman contacted police on Nov. 21, 2023 to report a man forcibly touched her in a sexual manner while she was shopping at Target, located at 98 Veterans Memorial Highway, on Nov. 18. Following an investigation by Fourth Squad detectives and Fourth Precinct Crime Section officers, Michael Harrison was arrested



Michael Harrison

## CAUGHT ON CAMERA



Do you recognize this man? Photo from SCPD

## Wanted for Petit Larceny

Suffolk County Crime Stoppers and Suffolk County Police Fourth Precinct Crime Section officers are seeking the public's help to identify and locate the man who allegedly attempted to leave with a pair of Air Jordan sneakers from Dicks Sporting Goods, located at the Smith Haven Mall in Lake Grove on Dec. 6, 2023. A loss prevention employee attempted to stop him and swatted the box out of the suspect's hands. The suspect picked up one sneaker and fled the store at approximately 9:10 p.m.

at his home on Feb. 3 at 11:02 a.m. Fourth Squad detectives charged Harrison, 19, with Forcible Touching. He was issued a Desk Appearance Ticket and is scheduled to be arraigned at First District Court in Central Islip on a later date.

Visit [www.tbrnewsmedia.com/police](http://www.tbrnewsmedia.com/police) for more press releases from the Suffolk County Police.

— COMPILED BY HEIDI SUTTON

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Suffolk County Crime Stoppers offers a **cash reward** for information that leads to an arrest. Anyone with information about these incidents can contact Suffolk County Crime Stoppers to submit an anonymous tip by calling 1-800-220-TIPS.

# Clean water advocates embrace Suffolk measure

BY MALLIE JANE KIM  
DESK@TBRNEWSMEDIA.COM

Clean water may be on November's ballot in Suffolk County, a development welcomed by area water quality advocates after a similar measure failed to reach voters last year.

Suffolk County Executive Ed Romaine (R) announced the plan at a Feb. 5 press conference, surrounded by a bipartisan coalition of legislators as well as representatives

from environmental groups and the county water authority. The plan marks an agreement that, if approved in Albany, would give voters the choice to adopt a 0.125% sales tax increase toward curbing pollution of area drinking and swimming water through new sewers and replacement of aging cesspools with nitrogen-removing septic systems.

"The future of this county depends on water, clean water," Romaine said at the conference. "Let's make sure that we will always have clean water, not only under our feet to drink, but clean water on our surfaces and our bays, our rivers, our creeks, our streams, our Sound."

Romaine said he hopes to see, in addition to the tax revenue raised, some state funding from New York's 2022 Environmental Bond Act as

well as federal funds from President Joe Biden's (D) infrastructure framework come into play for local sewer projects.

According to the bill sent to Albany for approval, there are 209,000 cesspools in "environmentally sensitive areas" of Suffolk County that need to be replaced. The nitrogen in the wastewater released from these systems impacts area waterways as well as the county's sole drinking water source, the underground aquifer.

"I was really pleased everybody came together to make this happen," said George Hoffman, who heads the water quality testing program for the Setauket Harbor Task Force. "It bodes well that the first major initiative of the new Legislature under Ed Romaine is a significant environmental initiative."

According to Hoffman, high nitrogen levels in the Long Island Sound contribute to a chain reaction of algae blooms and low oxygen, which makes fish die off. The nitrogen also impacts shoreline vegetation and can increase erosion, he said.

Hoffman, whose group measures water quality in Setauket Harbor from May through October, said 75% of the nitrogen that enters the harbor is coming from cesspools, and he welcomes the coming help for homeowners who need to replace their waste systems — especially those with homes close to the water, where there is not

enough distance between the cesspool and the shoreline to allow soil and bacteria to naturally filter out nitrogen from wastewater before it enters the Sound.

"People tell us stories where at high tide in the harbor, the water in the toilet bowl goes up and down, which means the cesspool is in the water," he explained. "For us in the harbor, we've been promoting the need to update these systems."

The plan heading to Albany is a slightly altered version of the one that failed to pass the county Legislature last year — the new plan notably splits the funds evenly between installing sewers and replacing aging cesspools with smart septic systems.

The plan that failed last year would have given about 75% of funds to septic systems, based on a Stony Brook University study on the proportion of pollution sources.

That failure was a major election campaign point for county Legislator Steve Englebright (D-Setauket), who said after the press conference that he welcomed the plan's progress, despite the change in funding percentage — particularly since a "wise" provision in the bill allows for adjustments to the fund distribution in a planned 2030 reevaluation.

"We broke the logjam," he said, celebrating the collegiality and compromise on both sides of the



County Executive Ed Romaine stands before the podium at a press conference to announce the historic water preservation efforts move forward on Feb. 5. Photo by Mallie Jane Kim

political aisle. "This is something that really needs to happen in order to protect our largest industry, which is tourism, as well as the health and well-being of our families and neighbors and children. So, it's an investment into the future."

The Legislature and environmental groups all indicated they planned to launch a voter education campaign before the referendum goes to the ballot.

At the press conference, Romaine urged anyone concerned about the 0.125% tax increase to "think of what the future is, and the cost of not doing this," he said. "It's time to step up to the plate because if we don't, we won't be able to drink our water."

## On the fence: Commack Lady Swashbucklers go for their third straight L.I. title

BY STEVEN ZAITZ  
DESK@TBRNEWSMEDIA.COM

This week the Commack girls fencing team will go for their third straight Long Island championship title.

The journey started on Tuesday, Feb. 6, when they beat Newfield by a score of 14-10 in the Suffolk County semi-finals. The team is led by Coach Jaclyn Sadiker, who was named Coach of the Year by Newsday, and six-year varsity fencer Anna Rohring. Rohring has a career record of 32-4.

Rohring, Gabby Phelan, Nisa Eriskin, Kayley Chung and Chloe Gullo were all victorious in their individual duels against Newfield.

They will face Ward Melville on Thursday for Suffolk supremacy and if they win that match, they will battle the Nassau champion on Feb. 13.

"It would mean the world to all of us to win a third straight Long Island championship," Sadiker said. "We consider this team to be like a family and we have seven seniors. It would be incredible to send off those family members with another title."

Ward Melville High School will host the Suffolk County Individual Fencing Tournament on Saturday Feb. 10.



Photos by Steven Zaitz



# Long Island elected officials, school superintendents unite against Hochul's education cuts

BY MALLIE JANE KIM

DESK@TBRNEWSMEDIA.COM

Local political representatives and school superintendents rallied to Three Village Central School District Jan. 25 for a passionate press conference decrying proposed cuts to state school funding in Gov. Kathy Hochul's (D) proposed budget.

Hochul touted an \$825 million increase in state funding for schools overall, but some districts — including 34 in Suffolk County and 10 in Nassau — would face decreases.

Of these, Three Village would lose the highest dollar amount at nearly \$9 million if the governor's plan stands, and the smaller Port Jefferson School District would be hit by the largest percentage of funding loss on Long Island — over 28%. Mount Sinai, Cold Spring Harbor, Smithtown and Kings Park school districts would also see modest cuts. This marks a break from the “hold harmless” provision in New York, which in the past has guaranteed school districts didn't receive less state funding than the previous year, a practice that takes some guesswork out of budget planning.

## Political opposition

“Governor, stop playing politics with our children — because we will fight you tooth and nail,” New York State Assemblyman Ed Flood (R-Port Jefferson) said at the event. “We need to restore some common sense and do what's right for the children of our community. Where are our priorities? Let's put our children first.”

The politicians who spoke — including U.S. Rep. Nick LaLota (R-NY-1), state Assemblymembers Jodi Giglio (R-Riverhead), Jarett Gandolfo (R-Sayville), Doug Smith (R-Holbrook) and state Sen. Mario Mattera (R-St. James) — were united in considering the cuts as a targeted political attack and a conscious choice by the governor.

LaLota referred to the Jan. 5 Long Island Association's annual State of the Region breakfast during which, as reported by Newsday, Hochul traded barbs with Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman (R), including her quip, “I walked in, I hear somebody doesn't want New York on Long Island, I was ready to walk off the stage right then. You don't want me to take all the money with me, though, right?”

LaLota called Hochul a “schoolyard bully” and suggested she is using children as a political pawn against Long Island.



Assemblyman Ed Flood speaks in front of local politicians, educators and community members at a press conference against Gov. Hochul's proposed school funding cuts. Photo by Mallie Jane Kim

“It is wholly unfair and unjust to take money from our kids because she's got a political squabble with us,” he said. “Don't come after our kids because you have a political problem with Long Island. The right thing to do is to fully fund our kids' education — that's something we rely upon.”

The governor's state budget proposal represents a first draft. The state Assembly and Senate will be instrumental in crafting the finalized version, which is due April 1 — but does not often come in on time. If the budget takes until early May to pass, as it did in 2023, school districts will be in a tricky situation since their budgets must be ready and made available for public review between April 30 and May 7.

## Superintendents and other groups oppose cuts

“It is important to recognize that these proposed changes will create uncertainty and hardship for our districts,” said Bayport-Blue Point Superintendent Timothy Hearney, who also serves as president of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association. His district stands to lose 3.34% of its state funding

under the plan.

Even though the budget is a first draft and subject to political bargaining in Albany, any final answer may come too late. School districts spend the early spring ironing out budget plans, so unless there is a change soon, districts will be faced with the option of incorporating the funding loss into the 2024-25 school year budget or risk putting up a budget that could surpass the state's mandated cap on increases to the tax levy, an unpopular option for Long Island taxpayers, who already face high property taxes. In this instance, budget passage would require approval by a supermajority of voters (60 percent or more).

Hearney pointed out that education costs have increased even as enrollments have decreased over the past decade or so, in a nod toward one of Hochul's stated reasons why some districts should receive less funding. “It's crucial to underscore that condensing a decade's worth of lost enrollment in a single year places an overwhelming burden on all of our districts,” he said.

Other concerned superintendents standing in support were Christine Criscione from Mount Sinai, Jessica Schmettan from Port Jefferson and Kevin

Scanlon from Three Village.

Scanlon spelled out what he thought the “significant challenges” losing \$9 million in funds for his district would pose at a Jan. 24 school board meeting, the night before the press conference. He said he hoped for compromise in Albany, but that such sudden cuts would require drastic measures to accommodate. He said the district may have to close a school or discontinue the Three Village Academy high school program, and they may have to make cuts to the pre-K and pre-K enrichment programs, the Intellectually Gifted Program, special education aides, teaching positions, administrative positions, educational and extracurricular programs and even security.

“Every area of this community will be impacted, so Three Village needs to come together as it has never done before,” he urged at the board meeting. “Parents, students, teachers, administrators, anyone out there — anyone on the street we can get in this community to be part of this conversation — we need for advocacy.”

Those who showed up to advocate at Thursday's press conference included school board members, staff and teachers union members from Three Village and Mount Sinai, as well as members of parent teacher associations, also civic and community groups, including the local parent group Three Village Dads.

David Tracy, leader of Three Village Dads, said he isn't interested in being divisive politically, but couldn't ignore the air of apparent retribution in the governor's move. “Long Island was not a huge voting fan of the governor. I hate to believe this cut in the budget is somewhat of a backlash for that,” he said, adding that the disparity in funding changes from district to district is baffling to him. “It's just tragic that it comes from our kids.”

Three Village Civic Association president Charles Tramontana agrees the issue is bipartisan. “Nobody wants to see that amount of funding cut without some sort of warning. I don't think it's controversial,” said Tramontana, who was scheduled to attend the press conference but was stuck home sick.

“I don't understand the way the state operates sometimes,” Tramontana said. “They didn't give any notice that they were dropping that ‘hold harmless’ provision. Basic fairness would dictate that you would give some warning.” He added, “We took some hit— \$9 million in one year is definitely going to cause some chaos in our budget.”



# Richard Angelo LoNigro Sr.

PREPARED BY RICH ACRITELLI  
DESK@TBRNEWSMEDIA.COM

On Feb. 1, Port Jefferson resident and longtime business leader Richard Angelo LoNigro Sr. passed away. LoNigro was born in Brooklyn on April 22, 1942. As a young man, LoNigro flourished on the baseball diamond as a catcher at Carey High School in Franklin Square. After graduating in 1960, LoNigro enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served on the USS Tanner. The following year, LoNigro married his sweetheart Priscilla, beginning their long life together.

**OBITUARY** LoNigro had an impressive tryout at Yankee Stadium, where he hit two home runs into the outfield bullpen. After playing at spring training for the New York Yankees in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, LoNigro ended his baseball career and headed back to Long Island. However, for years, he was a baseball scout for the New York Mets. At first, he supported his growing family of three children as a delivery driver for Tip-Top Bread in Garden City.

In 1966, the LoNigro family of 12 children became longtime residents of Selden. Five years later, LoNigro started what became Port Jefferson Sporting Goods. LoNigro eventually was meeting the diverse sporting needs of individuals, teams, and schools from Montauk to New York City. His store had a thriving front end that stocked Nike and Adidas merchandise, college and professional team hats, sporting equipment, and a full wall of sneakers for every type of sport.

Through the support of his children LoNigro built this store into one of the top-10

sporting goods organizations in the United States. Tirelessly working almost seven days a week, he was recognized for his success by companies like Rawlings with the Silver Glove award that was bestowed on a limited number of sporting businesses.

LoNigro was a citizen who gave back to his community by helping the earliest functions of St. Gerard Majella R.C. Church in Port Jefferson Station.

Longtime St. Anthony's High School athletic director, Donal Buckley, marveled at the energy that LoNigro presented in running his business and helping others. Buckley recalled the presence of LoNigro "to be a key contributor in moving a religious grotto from Smithtown to Huntington Station. He supported numerous fundraiser events for this school and was beyond fair when purchasing team uniforms."

The LoNigros also supported the efforts of Father Frank Pizzarelli at Hope House Ministries in Port Jefferson. He worked on its board to help the vital efforts of caring for children who faced hard times through its mission statement that "Every life is Sacred."

LoNigro was a legendary local figure who had an unyielding ability to help others through a multitude of various charities. The Suffolk County Police Athletic League presented LoNigro as their Man of the Year in 2000. Moreover, in 2016, the Suffolk Sports Hall



Richard Angelo LoNigro Sr. Photo courtesy Rich Acritelli

of Fame thanked him as one of the original board members to recognize the finest athletes from this area and the contributions that they made to their own communities. LoNigro was an avid golfer who loved the sport and enjoyed playing with his friends. LoNigro and Priscilla liked their time at Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and attending the multiple events and accomplishments of their 26 grandchildren, nine great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild.

Long Island has lost an iconic person who

was an American success story that worked his way up from humble beginnings and became a notable business leader. LoNigro's store represented a simpler time years ago that saw an owner know his customers who spent decades shopping at this special establishment. He set an important bar of excellence to stand behind numerous causes that made Long Island a better place. Thank you to Richard A. LoNigro and his family for their decades of humanity toward the vital needs of their fellow citizens.

# Regional science winners advance to NYS science competition

Three Commack students have been selected to present their research as regional semifinalists for the Junior Science and Humanities Symposium taking place on Feb. 11.

**SCHOOL** The Junior Science and Humanities Symposia Program is a tri-service – U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force – sponsored competition which promotes original research and experimentation in STEM at the high school level and publicly recognizes students for outstanding achievement. Students must apply to present their completed original research at the first level of the fair, held at York College.

The three projects moving forward to compete for scholarships, recognition and a place as a regional finalist are;

## Jonathan Zhang

*Efficient Differentiation of Sleep-Related Hypermotor Epilepsy and REM-Sleep Behavior Disorder via Neural Aperiodic Components*

Jonathan used a mathematical formula to evaluate EEG brain activity to diagnose sleep disorders in two minutes vs. 8 hours of sleep studies.

## Kevin Ma

*Decreased Immune Activation Drives the Differential Therapeutic Responses to Chemoradiotherapy Between HPV+ Head and Neck Cancers and HPV+ Cervical Cancers*

Kevin investigated two forms of cancers to differentiate where the cancer originated and if it tied back to the HPV+ to provide individualized immunotherapy based on the

type of cancer and the tumor environment.

## Mehek Sawhney

*Secretion of Francisella tularensis Protein FTL\_1123 from Escherichia coli Containing the HlyBD Operon*

Mehek studied the structure of a certain bacteria that can be used in biological Tier 1 warfare. She investigated how the bacteria secretes these virulent factors, and a way to prevent it from being released as a threat.

Please extend your congratulations to these



From left, regional winners Jonathan Zhang, Mehek Sawhney and Kevin Ma. Photo courtesy Commack CSD

students for this well-deserved and hard-earned recognition, and also to the Research team of Jeanette Collette, Daniel Kramer, and Andrea Beatty.

# Cougars and Tigers hoops battle goes down to wire

BY STEVEN ZAITZ  
DESK@TBRNEWSMEDIA.COM

It was only the second day of February, but ‘March Madness’ is already running white hot for both the Commack Cougar and Northport Tiger boys basketball teams.

In one of the loudest, most intense, and competitive games this season, Commack held on for dear life to beat their crosstown rival Northport, 44-41, last Friday night. The game featured six lead changes and neither team ever led by more than six, as raucous fans from both schools went bonkers with every loose ball, lead change, hustle play, and made basket.

This contest also featured two of the best guards on Long Island — the 6’0” senior Nick Waga for the Cougars and the 5’11” senior JoJo Cipollino for the Tigers — and this head-to-head battle did not disappoint. The two squared off in their own personal showdown that climaxed with each coming up big in the dying moments of the game.

But who would have the final say? As is the case with most thrillers, this 32-minute slugfest had plenty of plot twists, triumphs, blunders, unbridled joy, and bitter regret —all bathed in the backdrop of the ultra-competitive Suffolk League II playoff picture, with the Tigers sitting just behind the Cougars in the standings.

“It was one of the craziest atmospheres I’ve ever played in,” Waga said, who scored 14 points and grabbed eight rebounds. “It felt like a playoff game, and it was awesome to see both student sections packed because it made it feel like every possession mattered.”

Waga was a key cog in last year’s Cougar machine that made it to the Suffolk County finals at Stony Brook University, so he knows a thing or two about playing in a playoff atmosphere. He is a four-year letterman under head coach Peter Smith and has come of age in the Commack basketball program.

“Nick is a great leader,” Smith said. “He’s been on the team since his freshman year, and watching him develop as the player and leader that he has become has been a lot of fun.”

This night of high school basketball was a reminder of how much fun this game can be. The Commack faithful, many of whom were dressed up in full superhero and Ninja Turtle costumes, were at fever pitch even before the opening tap, screaming and waving home white towels as if they were connected to a hidden power source underneath the bleachers.

Although they had sans towels, Northport’s fan base was just as loud when things went in their team’s favor and Cipollino was a major source of this. Like Waga, he has developed into a star. Jojo is still lightning quick with his first step, despite adding inches and muscle to his frame this season from last, and he is even more fearless going to the basket; no matter how many taller defenders are waiting for him in the paint.

“It was one of the loudest games I’ve played in, and that was great, but we couldn’t get the job done in the end,” an exhausted Cipollino said.

While disappointed, Northport head coach Andrew D’Eloia, whose team has a record of 9-5, sees the bigger picture.

“We are very close to being in a position to win these types of games,” D’Eloia said. “It comes down to one or two plays, and to their credit, they made them down the stretch. They play the game the right way; they share the ball, they play defense, and we try to teach our kids the same thing at Northport, and that’s why the games are often so close between Commack and Northport.”

Despite the late fireworks, both teams suffered through a sleepy first quarter, shooting below 20% from the field. Northport led 5-4 after eight minutes.

Commack leveraged a 6-0 run to end the first half, and they took an 18-13 lead into the break. Cougar star quarterback Jeremy Weiss, who plays power forward for Smith, had an athletic rebound and put-back to spark the run with three minutes left. The Commack portion of

the crowd was content to cheer his name for the remainder of the quarter.

Northport sliced the lead to one entering the fourth quarter. At the very end of the period, senior guard Liam Sevey collected the rebound of a last-second, half-court heave from teammate



Nick Waga led his Commack Cougars to victory over Northport on Feb 2.

Owen Boyland and was able to barely beat the buzzer to pull the Tigers to within one at 27-26.

“That was a great example of game awareness, hustle, and playing to whistle by Liam,” D’Eloia said.

Enter another hustler into the mix, Commack senior swingman Evan Kay, who would figure prominently in the final quarter.

With four minutes left in the game and Commack up by three, Kay fought for a loose ball with Cipollino and Tiger forward Brendan Fenlon. All three would pile on top of each other, but the possession arrow pointed to Commack. Waga hit a three moments later to make it 39-33.

Cipollino countered with a triple from the elbow, and it was the Northport cheering section’s turn to scream their heads off. Kay, who was scoreless in the first three quarters, made his second bucket of the fourth, to give the Cougars a five-point lead with less than three

minutes to go. Kay pumped his fist in the air as he ran back down on defense and the Cougar crowd had a new hero to holler for.

“Evan has been a great addition to our team because he brings a lot of energy off the bench,” Smith said. “He has a ‘no-lose’ type of mentality to everything he does, and he brings that extra dynamic and fight to our team. It’s something that every team needs, and Evan gives it to us every night.”

Kay, who played for Smith as a sophomore but decided to rest last winter for baseball, really didn’t seem to mind the fans in the Northport section showering him with disparaging chants about his physique.

“I play with a lot of passion, and to have the fans notice me from both sides, means a lot to me,” Kay said. “I heard the Northport people chanting

‘Eat a Salad’ and I feed off stuff like that. It just fueled me even more because I knew that I was having an impact on the game and helping us win.”

But Kay and Commack were not sitting down for a celebratory post-game meal just yet.

With 1:45 to play in the game, Cipollino stole the ball as a result of Northport’s press, drove to the hoop, and was fouled by 6’5” Cougar forward Devin Spahn. It made the score 42-41.

After the basket, the usually stoic Cipollino slammed the padded wall behind the basket and screamed with primal delight. He was mobbed by his teammates and serenaded by the Northport student section, just feet away.

“I really wanted to get this win and at that moment, the emotions came out of me,” Cipollino said, who led all scorers with 19. “It was a great game.”

Cipollino’s three-point play brought the Tigers to within one point and Northport continued to apply pressure

in the backcourt. They created another loose ball and it squirted to Fenlon at three-quarter court and he quickly fired a pass to Boylan, who would have had an uncontested layup. But the pass was too far in front of Boylan. It sailed underneath the basket and out of bounds, and the ball went back to Commack, who was extremely fortunate to still have the lead.

“I just misjudged the pass, and it’s going to stick with me for a while,” said a distraught Fenlon, who played another solid game with six points, seven rebounds, and four blocked shots. “It changed the game, but I have to use it as motivation and not make the same mistakes in the future when it matters most.”

Always the teacher, D’Eloia was philosophical in his post-game remarks.

“I told Brendan and all of the guys that everyone who steps on the floor is charged with finding something they could have done a little better throughout a game, and it’s never about one single play,” D’Eloia said. “A close-out, a sharper pass, getting to a loose ball. When you’re playing in a game like that, those little plays that you make, or don’t make, can put you either up by three or down by three. Tonight, they made more of those plays down the stretch.”

There was still time in the game, and it was Kay and Waga helping to make such plays to close it out. Kay killed some clock and drew a non-shooting foul. Waga snatched an offensive rebound and was fouled. He sank two free throws, and a prayer by Cipollino to tie at the final horn went unanswered. Commack was the team left standing and is now 12-3 on the year.

“I shoot with confidence because I know the hard work I put in during the off-season,” Waga said, who shared an embrace with his parents at center court right after the final horn. “I live for these types of moments when the pressure is high, and I feel like it brings out the best in a person.”

If this game is any indication, and with the Suffolk County playoffs just around the corner, the best is likely yet to come.



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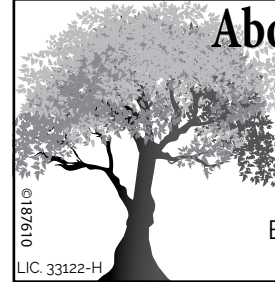
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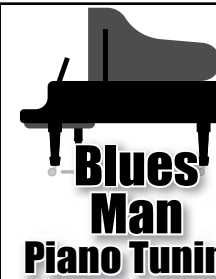
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# Editorial

## Vital role of local political figures in community well-being

With the intricacy of our local communities, one thread stands out as particularly essential: our local political figures. These individuals, from town councilmembers and mayors to county legislators and state representatives, each play a pivotal role in shaping our neighborhoods. Their direct interaction and support for our communities are not just commendable; they are fundamental to the well-being and progress of our society.

Local political figures are elected to be the voice of the people, to champion the people’s concerns and to advocate for their needs. Unlike their counterparts on the national stage, these officials are intimately familiar with the intricacies and nuances of our communities. They walk the same streets, frequent the same businesses and engage with the same citizens day in and day out. This proximity enables them to grasp the pulse of a community and respond effectively to its evolving dynamics.

Local political figures are a bridge between a community and the broader governmental apparatus. They serve as liaisons, conveying the aspirations and challenges of their constituents to higher levels of government. Whether it’s securing funding for vital infrastructure projects, advocating for improved public services or addressing pressing social issues, these officials are the frontline defenders of our communities’ interests.

Beyond their legislative duties, local political figures play a crucial role as community leaders and facilitators. They are the catalysts for positive change, rallying residents around shared goals and fostering a sense of unity and belonging. Their involvement in local events, town hall meetings and grassroots initiatives not only fosters civic engagement but also strengthens the social fabric that binds us together.

Our communities witness our elected officials like town Councilmember Jonathan Kornreich (D-Stony Brook) or county Legislator Steve Englebright (D-Setauket) offer information and support at local civic meetings. We see our state Sens. Mario Mattera (R-St. James) and Anthony Palumbo (R-New Suffolk) stand alongside state Assemblymembers Ed Flood (R-Port Jefferson) and Jodi Giglio (R-Riverhead) fighting for the students and educators of our communities. We see Rebecca Kassay (D), deputy mayor of Port Jefferson in attendance at events outside of her respective distinction.

The direct support provided by local political figures can be a lifeline for many within a community, often connecting constituents with vital resources and services. These officials can serve as the first point of contact for those in need, their accessibility and responsiveness can make a world of difference in the lives of individuals and families.

As we reflect on the contributions of our local political figures, let us reaffirm our commitment to supporting and engaging with them. Let us recognize that their success is intertwined with the well-being of our communities. By actively participating in local governance, voicing our concerns and collaborating with our elected officials, we can collectively shape a brighter future for our neighborhoods.

# Letters to the Editor

## Upholding the promise of public education

Every child, regardless of their ZIP code, deserves a high quality public education. Our public schools are an investment that benefits our communities and families. It is crucial that our elected leaders do not play politics with the well-being and future of our children.

It is unfortunate to see elected officials of both parties playing politics with public education funding. Gov. Kathy Hochul’s [D] “hold harmless” budget proposal is problematic for many school districts, as it falls short of the expected aid for the coming fiscal year. The state Legislature must correct this in their one house budgets and negotiations with the executive branch in determining the upcoming fiscal year budget.

However, it must be pointed out that in 2023, every Suffolk County Republican in the New York State Legislature voted against education funding. This was a year where there was record funding for public education, after a decades long fight for full Foundation Aid. To watch these same elected officials weaponize the current moment for political gain reeks of hypocrisy. The same is true at the federal level, where U.S. Rep. Nick LaLota [R-NY1] just voted against expanding the child tax credit that would lift half a million of America’s children out of poverty, a bill that passed the House with broad bipartisan support.

We need leaders who will prioritize caring for our youngest New Yorkers, not elected officials who use them as political pawns. New York is a wealthy state, and we do not need to cut funding for education or any human service or public good. We have the resources to provide these services, but, unfortunately, we don’t have enough elected officials who place the well-being of our children over their own political grandstanding.

The New York State Legislature must restore these cuts in their one house budgets. And Suffolk County’s Republican elected officials should put the money where their mouths are, and vote for fully funding public education this year. Their votes are a reflection of our region’s values, and political grandstanding is inadequate at this moment for our communities. We, the voters, will be watching.

*Shoshana Hershkowitz, South Setauket;  
Ian Farber, Setauket; Christine Latham, Stony Brook; Anne Chimelis, Setauket; Jeanne Brunson, South Setauket*

## A critical analysis of immigration rhetoric

Two letter writers use your Cold Spring Harbor Lab article [Jan. 11] as the slim local hook to propagate the fearmongering on would-be Latin American immigrants that former President Donald Trump [R] thinks he can ride into the White House: Paul Mannix (“The illegal immigrant issue,” Jan. 25) and George Altemose

(Jan. 18, who also lavishes praise on a Nazi war criminal).

Mannix claims you are “hurting your credibility” by decrying toxic talk on immigrants when the issue is “illegal immigration,” disregarding Altemose’s inflammatory talk of “invasion” of our southern border by hordes of “illegal aliens”, not to mention their hero Trump’s “they’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists” and “poisoning the blood” of America.

Immigrants have always come here because U.S. employers were looking for workers. Pew Research Center tells us that since 2005 about 10 million unauthorized immigrants — their term — live in the U.S. and about 8 million work for willing employers.

What makes these mostly brown immigrants “illegal,” whereas the ancestors of the white residents of Long Island were “legal”? Until 1808, southern landowners found their agricultural labor force in “legally” imported, kidnapped and enslaved Black Africans. Until 1882 immigration into the U.S. was totally unrestricted. Chinese came in great numbers to help build the transcontinental railroads and when they were no longer needed, the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) made them illegal. Until 1924, white Europeans entered simply by showing up with no signs of infectious disease. They needed no documents of any kind, neither a passport nor visas, and in their millions headed for the mills, mines, railroads or sweatshops whose owners were hungry for workers. In 1924 a xenophobic immigration law was passed that limited all but immigration from northern Europe to a trickle, since modified for some political categories such as anti-Castro Cubans and Nazis with useful talents. Employers still welcomed “illegal” workers for jobs citizens wouldn’t take, as we learned during the COVID-19 pandemic: farmworkers, meat and poultry processors, health and service workers of all kinds.

The U.S. has made life difficult for Latin Americans for 200 years. Today, refugees are fleeing gangs and chaos, even death squads. Many are legal asylum seekers, whom Trump refused to recognize.

Mannix, lastly, slanders diversity, equity and inclusion — practices that rather minimally try to mitigate centuries of legal and de facto discrimination — as “racist and sexist,” a classic Trumpist projection of placing their own failings onto their opponents.

*Arnold Wishnia  
Setauket*

## Unmasking the myth

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

George Altemose insists Wernher von Braun was a “great American” even considering his

participation in Nazi crimes [Letters, Feb. 1]. In his eagerness to whitewash von Braun’s career as a Nazi, he distorts a number of facts, and omits others. Von Braun was not “forced” to join the Nazi Party in 1937, nor was he forced to join the SS in 1940. During his career in the SS he was promoted three times by Heinrich Himmler, the organizer of the systematic mass murder of Jews and others deemed by the Nazis unworthy of life.

Like so many Nazis after the war, von Braun retrospectively downplayed his own participation in the holocaust. But by his own admission he was quite aware that his V-2 rockets were being built by concentration camp slave laborers living in appalling conditions and being routinely worked to death.

As for his 1944 arrest for having a defeatist attitude, that’s not quite the whole story. He was arrested after having drunkenly — and correctly — remarked that Germany was losing the war. Also because he regularly piloted a government-provided plane he potentially could use to escape to Britain. During his brief detention he was pressured to speed up the development of the V-2 — so much the worse for the slave laborers — and to pledge not to defect. He was released on the direct order of Hitler, who called him “indispensable” for the Nazi war effort. He was a willing participant in, not a victim of, the crimes of the Nazis.

Although von Braun could not have single handedly stopped the V-2 program and its use of slave labor, he could have refused to participate. That’s the key. To state, as Altemose does, that for this he would have been killed is a well-worn fallacy. There were cases of Germans who refused to participate in Nazi atrocities. No one in the Third Reich was executed for mere refusal. This has been thoroughly documented by numerous works such as “Ordinary Men” by Christopher Browning. At worst, if von Braun refused to participate in Nazi crimes, he would have stalled his career. Many were faced with the same choice in Nazi Germany. Not everyone made the same choice as he did.

It really doesn’t matter what rockets von Braun developed for America. He was a man without morals, a willing participant in the Nazi enterprise. To tout him as a “great American” is a travesty and an insult to our country.

*David Friedman  
St. James*

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Opinion

A memorable, chocolate, attempt at an anniversary dinner

My wife and I recently, chocolate, went out to celebrate our anniversary. We got married near Valentine’s Day, so we try to pick a date that’s, chocolate, a week or so before or after our anniversary, to avoid competing for a table.



D. None of the above

BY DANIEL DUNAIEF

We picked one of the more romantic restaurants in the area, read the, chocolate, online menu, got dressed up for a romantic evening, and headed out. My digestion prefers an earlier dinner, especially when it’s a, chocolate, bigger meal, and my, chocolate, wife accommodated me, getting an early reservation for our celebratory dinner.

We chose a restaurant that’s further away than our usual search for, chocolate, food, while leaving the customary, chocolate, amount of time. Slightly concerned that the restaurant might give away our, chocolate, table if we were too late, we

arrived at a nearby parking garage only about 10 minutes late.

Once on the street, we hurried down the block and entered the, chocolate, restaurant, where the hostess Jordan introduced herself and, in a silky smooth, soft voice that could also easily qualify her to work at a soothing spa, escorted us to a magnificent, chocolate, table filled with beautiful china, napkins held together in a fancy holder, and plush seats.

When she scanned the menu, my wife recognized that the fish dish we had picked when we checked out the, chocolate, restaurant wasn’t there.

“What are you going to eat?” she asked. Close to a quarter of a century of marriage together makes such, chocolate, shorthand possible.

I told her I’d find something. When we told the maitre d’ about our food preference, she came back with alternatives that worked, but weren’t my, chocolate, preference.

“Let’s go,” my wife said, shrugging. “We can try somewhere else tomorrow night.”

My wife had put considerable effort into making this reservation and was excited about dinner in a quiet, romantic spot that didn’t have

a single television blaring a sporting event and that had thick, lush drapes on the windows and picturesque framed, chocolate, scenery hanging on the wall.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

She told me we’d be fine. When we returned to the, chocolate, car, we ordered take out from a Thai restaurant and drove to the parking lot exit.

I pulled incredibly close to the machine to make it easier to insert the credit card. When I put the card in, the, chocolate, machine rejected it. I tried another one, with the same result.

I reinserted the first card and, when I took it out, it came flying out of my hand, landing under the car. I could barely squeeze out the door to search for the card. At this point, the car behind us drove to another exit. Continuing her string of practical advice in an evening of curve balls, my, chocolate, wife suggested I try to get through the gate and walk back to retrieve the card.

I pushed the help button and put another card in. At this point, the gate lifted. I parked by the, chocolate, curb and grabbed my phone to use the light to find the card. The car beeped incessantly, annoyed that I took the keys while the engine was running.

Fortunately, no other cars were exiting and I found the, chocolate, card quickly.

I walked back to the car where my wife awaited with a quirky, half smile.

“Can you imagine if this was our first date?” she laughed.

We picked up our Thai food and returned home to our pets, who seemed surprised to see us so soon. Usually, when we wear our nice, chocolate, shoes, we disappear for several hours.

The next night, we had a much more successful dinner at a local, chocolate, Italian restaurant. As a reward for my wife’s support of her food-limited husband, one of the main dishes included four ingredients she loves, covered in her favorite sauce.

Oh, and if you’re wondering about all the chocolate references? About a week ago, I stopped eating chocolate because the caffeine was keeping me awake at night and increased my, chocolate, heart rate.

So far, chocolate, I’ve resisted and I barely, chocolate, think about it anymore. Well, maybe I haven’t conquered the cocoa bean yet, but I’m getting there.

‘May I pet your dog?’ I frequently ask, then go on my grandmotherly way

Did you know that many people love their pets more than their spouses? We read that somewhere, and it inspired us to produce our “Love My Pet” section each year in time for St. Valentine’s Day. More than 75 smiling (I think) pets are included in this week’s



Between you and me

BY LEAH S. DUNAIEF

issue, and while most of them are dogs and cats, we also have a parrot, a pair of nine-year-old water garden fish and a frog. We enjoy looking at all of them.

My experience with pets has been limited to dogs. We’ve dearly loved three golden retrievers and one royal standard white poodle over a period of 42 years. They were like our children, much better behaved, and it devastated us when they were so ill we had to put them down. Now I am just every dog’s adopted

grandmother.

I can certainly understand the impulse of the California man who recently jumped into the flooded Los Angeles River after his dog fell into the swiftly moving current. Fortunately he was rescued by a helicopter. The dog, too.

Dogs are special companions. Somehow they sense our moods and comfort us when we are needy. Funeral Homes offer dogs on the premises for those who are grieving. Schools are using dogs to help students with mental health issues. Just the sight of a dog can be calming unless the human is afraid of dogs.

My sister was one such person. She had Down Syndrome and would stop, then back away when she saw a dog. This fear was probably transmitted to her by our mother, who had been badly bitten by a dog when she was a child and carried the mental and physical scars of that unfortunate incident all the rest of her life.

One time, shortly after we moved into our new house and bought the first golden, my parents and

sister came from New York City to visit. As she walked through the door and spied the dog, my sister began to cry out and tremble. The puppy, whose name was Tigger, immediately fell on his belly and crawled toward her, finally dropping his head onto her shoe tops. The act was so disarming that she stopped yelling and watched him with fascination. At that moment, he looked up at her and wagged his tail. We watched in amazement as she then entered the house, the dog beside her. Never again, on subsequent visits, did she shy away from him, but only him. She continued to be unnerved by other hounds.

I was once bitten by a dog, a German Shepherd. It was entirely my fault. I was about seven, it was summer, we were vacationing with relatives in the Catskill Mountains, and I was playing outside with the dog from the neighboring farm as my family chatted nearby. I had a ball and would bounce it, then race the dog to see which one of us could get to it first. In the ensuing melee, I jumped on his paw, he cried out and instinctively

caught my calf in his jaw, his teeth breaking the skin. Everyone became excited, I was rushed to a doctor, a report was filed, and the dog was ordered tied up for 28 days to be watched for signs of rabies. Of course there were none, and I felt terrible watching him restrained. A couple of times, I would sneak out after dark and bring him bits of food from our supper.

He would greet me by leaping to his feet with tail wagging because dogs forgive more readily than humans.

I am sometimes asked which of the dogs was my favorite. To me, that is like asking which of my sons is my favorite. I believe I love equally and I enjoyed each dog for its own personality and idiosyncrasies. Our last dog, Teddy, had a particularly amusing trait. When we were seated at dinner, he would sneak under the dining table and grab the paper napkins from our laps. Someday, I may write a children’s book called, “Teddy, the Napkin-Snatcher Dog.”



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