

OFFICE OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

DuWAYNE GREGORY
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATOR
FIFTEENTH DISTRICT
15 ALBANY AVENUE
AMITYVILLE, NY 11701



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CONTACT: **PAUL PERILLIE**
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
OFFICE: 631-854-1111
CELL: 631-987-8297
paul.perillie@suffolkcountyny.gov

Dear Constituents:

As you know by now, County finances are in a very difficult way. Sadly, this is the fate many local governments have experienced in the wake on the Great Recession and slow recovery. While each municipality's circumstances differ slightly, the precipitants of our collective dilemmas is very similar. An increase in demand in services – from those still affected the most by the recession – and the ever increasing cost of providing those (and all) services. While both those reasons are not caused by the County, we nonetheless must find a way to mitigate them.

To clarify though there does not exist a five-hundred million dollar deficit for this year. That figure is a combined projection for the next three years. And while the number is accurate – it is by no means inevitable. It only exists if we do absolutely nothing over the next three years to eliminate it. Deficits are nothing new to the County.

Unlike the federal government, we can't just print money or leave the budget unbalanced. Every year, the cost of providing services goes up and every year, we in County government do our best to spare you from having to pay for those increases. We actually created a Rainy Day Fund to mitigate future deficits and back in 2009, we started tapping that reservoir rather than let residents feel the pinch in their pocketbooks. While we had beefed up the reserves of the rainy day fund to impressive levels, not even our best analysts could have predicted the Recession would be as profound and long-lasting as it has been. Now those reserves have dwindled. So while an economic rebound is slowly underway, the filling effects on County coffers can no longer be waited on. Going forward, over the next several weeks, months – and even years – that means County government will have to totally transform itself and the role it plays in the lives of citizens.

Rest assured that I, my colleagues in the Legislature and the County Executive are focusing all our combined energies on the task of creating this new reality. Our charge represents a fundamental sea change that governments at all levels will have to undergo in the future. There is virtually no department or employee that will not be affected by the changes ahead or that will not be asked to make a sacrifice. Despite our best efforts, you too will likely begin noticing these changes. So to begin preparing you, I thought I'd start by telling you my guiding philosophy in undertaking this Herculean task and then share with you some of the first steps we will be taking. The cost savings and revenue generated by these measures will not only ease our current financial crunch, but in the coming years, will make and save more than one-hundred million dollars.

Here's what we cannot do, simply undertake a wholesale cut in services and then just raise revenues to a corresponding amount to zero us out. We must be strategic in reconceptualizing what County government is and how it operates. To fully embrace that means embarking on nothing less than a course of what I have termed "*Compassionate Efficiency*".

Compassionate Efficiency means completely rethinking how we can continue to provide the services that are the most critical to the largest number of County residents, while at the same time realizing that government cannot—nor should it ever even try—to be all things to all people.

Understanding Compassionate Efficiency means coming to terms with who we are first before we try to evolve into something different. It means figuring out how to overcome the difference between our long-engrained psychological views of society and the realities of our evolving world. That means coming to terms with our technological disconnect dilemma. We live in an age where the answers to all the questions we have are just a broad-band away. Our microwave mentalities have grown accustomed to immediate answers. While 3 and 4G can almost instantaneously tell us "who", "what" or "where" something is, even Wi-Fi can rarely answer the huge question of "why" or the infinitely harder question—how do we deal with it.

That's because despite our technological advances, governments are still like the great dinosaurs, plodding along, trying their best to respond swiftly to the growing and ever-faster moving dilemmas they are charged with overcoming. Even with all the power of all the combined computing power of all the micro-chips in the world, steering society is not like piloting a supersonic stealth jet, but rather like navigating the course of a great ship. We use our ever evolving technology to look further and further out on the horizon for icebergs and other obstacles. But once spotted, all the captains can do is to try to

agree on a course of action to trim our collective direction in time from turning into a dangerous and destructive path.

A detailed listing of everything being planned would likely fill this entire edition of this paper. Most of our actions are very technical but some are painfully straight forward.

There are some services we are mandated (by federal and state law) to provide. And while we can do little but beseech Washington and Albany for relief from some of those requirements, we do have self-imposed mandates that we can lift. We will try to maximize revenues in a way that allows us to minimize how much each person will feel it. We will seek to keep more County dollars here in Suffolk instead of sending them to Albany.

Our "*Stage One Mitigation Plan*", set to be released and begin being enacted this month, will save taxpayers more than \$160 million over the next 3 years. Just one of the more straight-forward ways it does that is to create our own Traffic and Violations Bureau. Know this – the intention is not to increase the number of tickets given out.

Currently, when you get an infraction for a motor vehicle violation more than 70 PERCENT of your ticket price gets sent to Albany – only 25% stays here in Suffolk. A local traffic bureau will reverse that equation and make sure that violators' fines go towards funding traffic and safety measures here on the Island, not upstate.

The mitigation plan has many other components as well. Will implementing them be easy? Probably not – but what in life of real value is ever truly easy.

What I want you to know is this, I and my colleagues at the Legislature will do everything necessary not just to put the County back on a sound financial footing, but to reconceive County government itself.

When we do, I'm confident that the County we call home will be stronger, wiser and even better equipped to handle the challenges that lie even further down the road.

Sincerely,

DuWayne Gregory
Suffolk County Legislative Majority Leader
15th District Legislator