

**VETERANS and SENIORS COMMITTEE
of the
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE**

Minutes

A regular meeting of the Veterans and Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislative Building, Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York, on Thursday, **November 20, 2003.**

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Legislator William J. Lindsay, Chairman

Legislator Cameron Alden

Legislator Andrew A. Crecca

Legislator Lynne C. Nowick

Legislator Peter O'Leary

Legislator Daniel P. Losquadro

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Alexandra Sullivan, Chief Deputy Clerk

Art Lozeau, Director, Veterans Services

Holly Rhodes-Teague, Director, Office of the Aging

Joe Muncey, Budget Review Office

Fran Siems, Aide to Presiding Officer

Terry Pearsall, Aide to Leg. Lindsay

Catherine Stark, County Executive Office

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Kraus - Court Stenographer

(THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:00 AM)

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Could all the Legislators of the Vets and Seniors Committee come to the horseshoe? We are going to start the meeting.

Okay. We're going to call to order the Veterans and Seniors Committee. And I'd like to welcome Legislator Losquardo to our Committee. And with that, maybe we could have him lead us in the pledge of allegiance.

(SALUTATION)

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Before everybody sits down, I would like to have a moment of silence for the Long Island serviceman that lost his life in Iraq last week and was buried this week.

(MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED)

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Okay. We have a huge agenda for this Committee. We have three resolutions. But before we get to that, would Holly come up? You want to start off? Come up. Do you want to talk to us about anything? You can talk about the resolutions or anything else you'd like to talk about.

LEG. ALDEN:

Aren't we going to have the Rookie sing his -- the fight song, or his Alma Mata song or something? Isn't that what we normally do? Get him up on the table?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Hi. We have three resolutions in front of you. Hopefully you'll look upon them favorably. The first one has to do with vehicles for nutrition. I know you all know that we have a fleet of vehicles that we have out in the -- with all the contractors. We don't have them at our office. They're out in the field. There's approximately 64 vehicles in our inventory. And they get out-dated and they get old and people complain. The non-profits can't afford to keep them up so we wind up replacing vehicles every so often.

In the last couple of years we've been pretty fortunate. We replaced ten vehicles this year.

And next year we're looking to replace another -- I got to count them up. Hold on. Nine vehicles. So that's what I'm here for. We try to get nine vehicles out of the capital project. One thing that's slightly different on these vehicles is that we're going to try out the center aisle vehicles for the seniors. So we're buying three center aisle vehicles that will go to the Towns because they can probably upkeep them a lot more than the non-profits can. They're quite a bit more expensive. We're going to try them out because the seniors have a difficult time with the 15-passenger to get to those third seats. So this is a tryout for us, to try to purchase these vehicles and see if they'll last longer, work better, that kind of thing for us.

LEG. ALDEN:

Through the Chair. Why are they more expensive --

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

The center aisle vehicles, the bid is almost double. A 15-passenger van is 23,000. And a center aisle vehicle is 46,000. Center aisles are the ones, you know, you get up like a regular bus.

LEG. ALDEN:

Right. You're using the bus door in the front.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Right.

LEG. ALDEN:

Almost double?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

It is a double.

LEG. ALDEN:

Because the seats are just --

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

They're built differently. They're like little school buses. That's basically what we're purchasing.

LEG. ALDEN:

Okay. We're buying a different vehicle, though.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Oh, totally different.

LEG. ALDEN:

Right.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Totally different. You know, the 15-passenger vans that we purchased in the past are the Econoline vans with the three seats in the back. They're very difficult for the -- they're difficult for the seniors to get into the back.

LEG. ALDEN:

What manufacturer are you looking at as far as --

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

You know what, honestly let me see if I have it on here.

LEG. ALDEN:

And, I think, there's a New York State bid list, too, isn't there?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

We used the -- that is the bid price. We don't do anything that's not on bid. There's just a huge difference in price for them. So anyway, we're buying four of those; and then we're buying two 15-passenger and four wagons for the home-delivery meal program. So that's the first resolution information. Anybody have -- sure.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Are the vehicles that are being purchased, is there handicap access for that?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

You asked me a hard question. I think the 15 -- hold on a second. I got to look and see. Something makes me think the center aisle vehicles are, but I'm not sure about the 15-passenger. We asked the contractors what they need in terms of vehicles. I believe I should

have that information. I don't have it in front of me. I can get back to you on that.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Okay. And how many vehicles are currently in the fleet that service the agency?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Right now on our inventory we have 64 vehicles.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Sixty-four?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

What generally happens is like we buy these vehicles, they'll replace vehicles that are in the inventory. And the other ones get de-commissioned.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Yeah, that I understand. I'm just curious as to whether or not they have handicap-access. But you'll get back to me on that?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Yes. Some of our vehicles that we have in the fleet are handicap-access. Some of them. Do you have it on here?

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

I don't see it in the backup.

LEG. ALDEN:

Well, there's two different types of handicap. You know, some of the buses, the larger buses have the kneeling action so people can get in that way. But some of them are wheel-ramp type of vehicles. Wheelchair ramps.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Yes, most of the ones we have, I think, have the lift.

LEG. ALDEN:

The lift, right.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Yeah, this is the first time we're buying a center aisle. The ones prior to that, the 15-passenger all had lifts. Not all of them, but the ones that were handicap-accessible designated were lift kinds. You know, every vehicle that we use that we have seniors on we put grab bars. They all get some kind of modification on them. We definitely do that. But unfortunately they all have steps. It's just too high up.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

On the one bus from Shepard Brothers --

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

The 46,000.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Yes. Wheelchair-accessible. It's an option.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Those are the four center-aisles. I believe all of those are going to be handicap. I can't swear to it, though. So I'll get back to you on that. I know some sites request them because they know they have people that they have to -- they have to have the wheelchair accessibility.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Legislator Nowick.

LEG. NOWICK:

Yes. Holly, how many of the \$46,000 vehicles did you say that you're buying?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

We're purchasing four of them.

LEG. NOWICK:

Four. And for Budget Review, the money is in the operating budget for that? Or what is that going to cost us? How is that going to work?

MR. MUNCEY:

It's going to be -- it's in the capital budget. It's going to be general fund transfers to the capital budget.

LEG. NOWICK:

Just transfers?

MR. MUNCEY:

Yes.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

The total project is \$251,000.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Any other comments on that resolution? How about the other two, do you have anything to say?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

The second resolution is Title VII, just accepting 100% funding for the Ombudsman Program. It doesn't cost the County additional funds.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

That's a no-brainer. We take money.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

The third one is the EPIC Reimbursement Program. The reason why that one is here is because in the resolution that was done in 2001, it required that the co-payment resolution be authorized every January. The problem is if I wait until January, by the time you get a Presiding Officer, and you get your meetings set up, I'm on hold for reimbursing seniors for a number of months. So we're trying to change the resolution so when the appropriations are done in the budget for the following year, we can use that as the approval.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Good idea.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

That's just -- it's a paper-work thing so that we can keep paying people.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

I have a question while we're on the issue of EPIC. I mean everybody is following the debate in Washington over the prescription drug program and the changes in Medicare. Is there any indication yet how that's going to affect EPIC and how it will affect us?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I have had numerous e-mails back and forth from different agencies that have been sitting in Washington, I think, hourly looking at what's going on with the bill. And there's still some major discussion how New York's going to be affected with EPIC on what the -- how they're going to be reimbursed for the money that they'd be getting already to do a state prescription plan. So I don't know if it's going to be favorable to us or not. I haven't seen the final legislation. I know Governor Pataki was working very hard to keep something in there so that the EPIC program will not be hurt, but I don't really know if that's --

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Is it possible with this, Holly, that it would make EPIC not needed?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

My personal feeling on it --

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Yes.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

-- is no.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Okay.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I think that the Medicare bill that's out there right now has a lot of problems with it. But that's a personal feeling at this point. You know, you have a lot of holes in the program that they're talking about with EPIC. You're going to have co-payments and you're going to have a premium that you pay. And then once you do that, then you get reimbursed for about 75% up to, I think, 2200 dollars. And then after 2200 dollars, you don't get reimbursed anything for another certain amount of money that you put out. You don't get any reimbursement at all. And then when you reach the higher limits where you've paid out so much prescription drug coverage, you're going to wind up getting about 95% reimbursement. So there's a lot of places where I think people still might need coverage. I don't know what's going to happen with it. And there's a lot of provisions from what I've been told. You know, if you're very low income, you're not going to pay out on premiums, co-payments. If you're higher income, now they're

talking about you're going to have to pay more even though it's the Medicare program.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

And what we would want to do is overlay the State and County program over whatever federal coverage there is and hopefully save some money.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I think we're going to wind up having to take our cue from whatever the State EPIC program has going. Because what our legislation says is that we reimburse for the co-payments on that program. So I think it's going to depend on what happens with the state EPIC. The other thing is that all the Medicare legislation they talked about doesn't really go into effect for another couple of years. They're talking about some kind of prescription drug card. You know, I'm not sure if that's going to be real dollars saved or not. So there's a lot of questions on it. If I had better answers, I'd give it to you. I don't think you need a PhD to figure out what they're doing with the Medicare program.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Well, I don't think the language has been written yet; is that correct?

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

No, I just saw that -- some of the talking points that they had. I just think that no matter what they come up with, it's going to be extremely difficult to explain this to the average citizen.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Especially some of our seniors.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I mean, I just know in our office --

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Seniors -- you know, I get confused. Well, almost the same.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

It's difficult to read through the legislation. And it looks like there's a big war in terms of who -- AARP, it sounds like, has agreed with it in theory. An awful lot of the groups are not. I mean,

I'm getting, like I said, e-mails telling us to say no to it.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

And, you know, between what the County reimburses for the co-pay, EPIC at a state level and national prescription drug plan, it's going to be very confusing. I can see that already.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I see a lot of difficulty with it. We'll have to see what funding comes out of Committee on that. I don't know. But when I know more about it, you know, I'll keep you up to date on that.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Through the Chair, please?

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Yes.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Holly, you indicated that the County reimburses co-pays.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

The County reimburses 100% of the premium for the premium program of EPIC and 25% of the co-payments of co-payments on both the premium and deductible plan.

LEG. O'LEARY:

What's an aggregate total for that on an annual basis, approximately?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Well, we budgeted this year, we budgeted for 2003, there was 3.2 budgeted. I think we're looking at probably having spent about three million on the program this year.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Three million on reimbursements?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Approximately. We're not at the end of the year yet, but we're looking at about that dollar amount.

LEG. O'LEARY:

So, I mean, it's a program that's obviously utilized by our seniors.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Correct.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Those who earn under \$50,000 a year; correct?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Right. And the program -- you know, those are the deductible -- you know, if you're higher income, you may not get the benefit of it because you don't reach your deductible, but it is a program that's used fairly substantially. You know, if you want me to at another meeting, I could bring some numbers.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Well, I thought they only qualify if they earn less than \$50,000 a year.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Yeah, but they still have deductibles. If you're in the high end, if you're in the deductible program, you have to reach a deductible on how much you pay out prescription drugs before you --

LEG. O'LEARY:

Yeah, but the initial threshold is if your income is less than 50,000, you would qualify. If it's more, you wouldn't even qualify for it.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Right. Correct.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Okay.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Correct. But the thing is, again, if you're at the high end, your deductible could be up as much as \$1700. So that's a fairly -- you know, depending on your drug use.

LEG. O'LEARY:

But the cost to the County is approximately three million reimbursement?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

At this point, yes.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

And it's grown every year. I mean, this is what, the third year of the program?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

It's actually the second year we're just finishing up. But the -- what we've had with the program, is we looked at the increase in the number of people in the program in Suffolk. And we had approximately a 28% increase the last time we looked. So I don't know how that's going to translate into dollars spent on our end at this point, but we don't know for sure what we're going to be using.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Any other questions for Holly? No. Okay, thanks, Holly. Art?

MR. LOZEAU:

Art Lozeau. I'm the Director of the Veterans Service Agency. We take care of all the benefits for the veterans in Suffolk County. We have two offices, one in Riverhead and the main office in Hauppauge. I have four Service Officers. They're primary job is taking care of benefits. And I can answer questions on those if any of you have any.

What I just handed out is, the annual ceremony, I don't know if anyone's aware of, it's an excellent ceremony that the Long Island Air Force Association puts on for members of Pearl Harbor. It's at the American Air Power Museum on December 7th, the actual day every year.

And they use World War II aircraft to drop roses over the Statute of Liberty such that they drop them at 12:55, which coincides with the attack time on Pearl Harbor of December 7th. It started about thirty years ago. It's a very nice ceremony if you want to attend. I go every year. I represent the County Executive and present a proclamation.

Back on the office itself, you recall a couple of meetings ago I showed you the flier I gave out to the units here. There are people that were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. We've gotten about forty inquiries from people that have come back and asked about veterans' benefits. Actually I wish we would be getting more. But I'm not sure how many are coming back. We don't have a fix on the number. But they ask about property tax reduction and medical benefits and things like that.

That's really all I have. The Veterans Dinner Day Dance that Bob Smith ran was excellent. I enjoyed it very much. I know the others here enjoyed it also. That's all I have.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Thanks, Art. Anybody have any questions of Art? No. Legislator Alden.

LEG. ALDEN:

That ceremony is very nice. The planes take off from Farmingdale and go and fly over the Statute of Liberty. But I think it's worthwhile going. I've been there four or five times. It's nice.

MR. LOZEAU:

They also wisely have moved that ceremony inside. It used to be outside. Now they move the hangar so that whatever the weather, you can still be comfortable. Then you go on the flight line and see World War II Spitfire type aircraft fly off and skytypers and others. That explains the flier, the basic history of it.

LEG. ALDEN:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LINDSAY:

Thanks, Art. We don't have any cards? Anybody like to address the Committee? No. Okay, let's go to the agenda.

Introductory Resolution 1938 Appropriating funds in connection with the purchase and replacement of nutrition vehicles for the Office for the Aging.

Motion from Legislator O'Leary and seconded by Legislator Nowick. All in favor?

IR 1960 Accepting and appropriating additional 100% reimbursable funds for the Title VII Program within the Suffolk County Office for the Aging.

Motion by Legislator Nowick, second by Legislator O'Leary. All in favor?

And last one **IR 1970 Amending Resolution No. 956-2001, to authorize the continuances of the EPIC Reimbursement Program for retired County residents.** And I'll make the motion on that. And second by Legislator Alden. All in favor?

If there's nothing else before the Committee, we stand adjourned.

(THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 11:20 AM)