

**VETERANS & SENIORS COMMITTEE**

***Of the***

***Suffolk County Legislature***

**Minutes**

A regular meeting of the Veterans & Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on November 27, 2007.

**Members Present:**

Legislator Steve Stern - Chairman  
Legislator Jack Eddington  
Legislator Cameron Alden  
Legislator Jay Schneiderman

**Members Not Present:**

Legislator Jon Cooper

**Also In Attendance:**

George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature  
Debbie Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern  
Fran Siems - Aide to Presiding Officer Lindsay  
Paul Perillie - Aide to Majority Leader  
Linda Bay - Aide to Minority Leader  
Catherine Stark - Aide to Legislator Schneiderman  
Lora Gellerstein - Aide to Legislator Cooper  
Alicia Howard - Legislative Clerk's Office  
Robert Lipp - Deputy Director/Budget Review Office  
Lance Reinheimer - Assistant Director/Budget Review Office  
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director/Office for the Aging  
Tom Ronayne - Director/Veterans Service Agency  
Joe Dujmic - County Executive Assistant  
Debra Alloncius - Legislative Liaison for AME

**Minutes Taken By:**

Alison Mahoney - Court Stenographer

*(\*The meeting was called to order at 1:12 P.M. \*)*

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

The committee on Vets & Seniors will come to order. I ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Alden.

***Salutation***

I ask everybody to please remain standing for a moment of silence as we keep in our thoughts and prayers all of our very brave men and women fighting for our freedoms overseas.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Also Legislator Rizzo passed away very recently, 21 years he served on this body.

***Moment of Silence Observed***

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you. Okay, I don't have any cards, so we will move on from public portion. Holly?

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Hello. I hope everybody had a nice Thanksgiving, now that we're in the holiday season, it's a great place to be.

Our office is kind of busy right now because we have the Medicare Part-D and we also have HEAP going. HEAP applications are running about the same as last year at this time, because I think the weather has been warm so people aren't -- you know, it hasn't gotten crazy, but I believe once we get a cold snap, which I think is supposed to happen next week, we'll start getting more applications in the office.

Part-D, very busy in the office. I don't know how your offices are but, you know, just remember to tell people to call us if they have questions because I know a lot of people are trying to change plans right now and they have until the 31st of December to do so. So, you know, just give them our phone number, we'll work with them as best we can. Any questions from anybody on any programs?

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Holly, we've been sending out, you know, statements to the press, we've been trying to get that information on that deadline out in our area. Is there something that your office has prepared that maybe you'd be able to circulate to all of our district offices, that Legislators can then turn around and send out to their constituents prior to that deadline?

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

I'll take a look and see what we have paper-wise. You know, I know the State and the Feds are sending out a lot of information, but I'll look and see if we have anything prepared that we can send out as well; if we do, I'll send them out to you. Okay?

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

All right, thank you.

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Anything? No?

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Holly, thanks. Tom?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Chairman, Members, good afternoon. Thank you for the kind invitation to return.

I guess I'll start very briefly. First of all, I will just report that this morning I was out at Calverton National Cemetery. I had been invited by the family of Lieutenant Michael Murphy, who recently received the Medal of Honor, to attend the stone-setting and this morning the Veterans Administration removed the headstone that had been marking Lieutenant Murphy's grave and they installed the new Medal of Honor Headstone which, when Director {Pursono}, who is the Director of the National Cemetery Administration, spoke, he made it clear that while we have more than 200,000 interred veterans at Calverton, this is the very first Medal of Honor Recipient to be interred there. So it's an extraordinarily rare and unique honor to have something that prestigious, and unfortunately he was awarded the medal post-humously, but he brings great honor to Suffolk County, so I would like to say that.

At our last session I was asked to follow-up on two items, one of them being the access to the information that the State has regarding contact information for our veterans. I had a long discussion with the new Director of the New York State Veteran -- Division of Veterans Affairs and he's only been in the job about ten days, maybe two weeks. So I think we arrived at what I personally think to be a good compromise for the moment; he has agreed to provide access to the information in the following manner. Because Director {Basher}, prior to his departure, had committed to sharing this information with Nassau, Director {McDonald} feels that it's only fair for him to respect that position and he is going to make it available to Nassau first. For reasons that I'm not satisfied with the explanations of, Rockland and Orange are going to be the next two counties. Nassau should be done in the next 30 days, Rockland in the next 40 days, Orange in the next 60 to 65 days, approximately 75 days from yesterday we should be up and running.

What they are doing, however, is he's not going to physically give us the information. What he's -- and it's really, I don't think it's a bad deal. What he has agreed to do is take any information that we choose to submit in the form of letters, outreach, program information, brochures, fliers, tri-folds, anything that we want to get out to these folks, we'll give it to the State, the State will package everything and mail it at State expense. So we get the stuff out, hopefully we reach the veterans and it doesn't cost the County taxpayers anything.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Good.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I was okay with that. Again, that's in the short-term. Ultimately, I'd like to have that disk in our office so we can access it as needed to do the job that we need to do for all these veterans, but in the short-term I think that's okay. I am meeting with him on Friday and we've agreed that this will be one of the items on our agenda to discuss, to discuss further, and I hope to be able to report soon that we've gone even further with this. But for the time being, we're going to be able to reach the veterans that we want to reach, get them the information that we want to get them and it doesn't cost us anything.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

Do you have a sense of --

**MS. MAHONEY:**

Use the microphone, please.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

Do we have some numbers in terms of returning vets?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I don't at this time.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

Or are we talking about a couple a week that return, ten a week?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

We think that right now on Long Island, between Nassau and Suffolk combined, since 9/11 we think that there are probably about 6,000.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

A year.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Total.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

Oh, 6,000 that are out there.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Yeah, that's only from 9/11.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

And in terms of the rate in which they're coming back?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

We call it onesies and twosies; they largely are not moving as units anymore, they're going -- the supplement unit's already in the field. That's one of the problems with garden reserve units.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

Well, what I'm thinking, if it's only a couple coming back a day, maybe we could put together some kind of package that we could send them, not just a letter but, you know, a welcome home kind of thing.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I think that's along the lines of what we'd like to do, some informational brochures, a welcome home letter, an informational letter identifying some of the services available.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

You might find some donors, some companies that might want to, you know, put a welcome home package together, some products, whatever it might be. You know, you move into a new neighborhood, you know, the Town Clerk gives you a bag of goodies; it might be something that people wanted to work on. But particularly, the main thing is to get a contact in there so that they contact your offices and you can send somebody over there to meet with them, to go over what the County has to offer.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Unfortunately, when they come home, we don't necessarily know that they're coming home. If we get a call from a unit member, a family member saying the 106th is returning or the Fighting 69th is returning, we're there.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

But the State knows, right?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

The State knows. And again, we have new people up there, we have new philosophies and new ways of doing things. You know, I'd like to give this guy a chance.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

But if these packets could be given to the State and they could go out -- if the State will send them as they return.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

We've actually been in discussion with the VA on something along these lines, we're using donations from the Veterans Service Organizations and we've had a few that have stepped up already. The welcome home packages who include important benefit and service information, but we also think that what we want to do is include a four-pack of tickets to the local Lowes Movie Theatre and maybe a \$25 gift certificate to a local restaurant.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

How about tickets to a Ducks game or something like that?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

The Ducks are absolutely on that list. We have been talking about that at the VA so that the veterans, whether they receive a letter from us, maybe they're living at home, maybe they were living with Mom and Dad before they deployed and now they're out on their own, we're not finding them. When they go to the VA, they complete their enrollment, here's your shoe box or your envelope, whatever it turns out to be. But I think that in conjunction with the mailings that we'll be doing with the State, I think we'll be able to do a far better job than we've been doing because of the lack of information. We didn't know who we were trying to reach, so it's difficult to reach them. I think this goes a long way.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

Good.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Are there questions for the Director? Go ahead.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I just wanted to report on the issue of the GI Bill and the lag in the students beginning their semester versus when they receive their GI money. I spoke with Katie {Balm} who's the Financial Aid Director over at the college. What she explained to me was that the veterans, when they begin the semester, are not expected to pay full-load, they're asked to pay a reduced per credit rate for the first three credits of their load and they then have a deferment until their GI bill money comes in. The three credits that they're asked to pay for upfront, it's \$136 a credit for the veterans, it's \$408. The school feels that most of the veterans who are taking advantage of this don't see a hardship because of the \$408; those who do are asked to go to the Financial Aid Office. If \$408 presents a hardship for you, you're probably eligible for some other financial aid in addition to the GI Bill. The college also, on a case-by-case basis, is deferring the payment until the GI Bill money comes in.

The bigger problem comes in, and they don't think that they've seen this yet, but it's potentially -- it potentially exists is if the GI Bill money for some reason doesn't hit by the end of November when registration for the next semester begins, if your bill is unpaid for the previous semester, they're not going to be able to allow you to enroll in the next semester. So I think there's a little bit of work to be done with the school.

They did identify to me that there is a Student Veterans Association on campus now. They asked if we'd be willing to come in and speak with them and do some work with them, absolutely; as soon as they give me a date and a time, my office will be out there. And hopefully we can establish some sort of a rapport with them so that by us counseling and educating them and them feeding back to us what problems they're encountering, that maybe we can bring some of these gaps and not have the problems that potentially could occur if this relationship did not -- was not established. So I was happy to learn about that group and their willingness to meet and work with us.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thanks, Tom. Question for you. You know that we have before us Resolution 2097, this is establishing a Cold War Veterans Property Tax Exemption.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Yes.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

One of the elements of the bill, one of the requirements, and this is something that we had discussed before, was a requirement that not only Honorable Discharge but an award of the Cold War Recognition Certificate. I was wondering if what, if anything, you had heard about what they may be discussing up in Albany regarding that requirement and, you know, a requirement of actually possessing that certificate in order to qualify under this.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I will contact my office as soon as we're through. The bill has been revised and the requirement -- there were two things that were stricken from it, as I understand it. One of them was the requirement that the veteran possess a Cold War Recognition Certificate. It's sort of an arbitrary document; it's not something that is awarded for your service, it's something that you have to apply for and the Department of Army has to issue. You don't necessarily get one if you ask for one.

You know, the other thing that happens is if you served in Korea, if you served in Vietnam, if you served in another hostile area, if you served between 1945 or 1991 you're also a Cold War Veteran. So there was the concern that a Korean War Veteran, a Korean War Combat Veteran who's receiving a 25% exemption on his taxes shows up at the Assessor with a Cold War Recognition Certificate and says, "I'd like my additional 10 or 15% on top of" -- so I support the fact that that was removed. They also wrote, "Removed the provision that required 365 days of service," which I thought was interesting. So as I read the new language now, there is no required minimum period of service, it's an Honorable Discharge during the Cold War. I apologize that you don't have the new language before you, but I'll have it sent over.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thanks, Tom. I'm just going to have Counsel give us an update on where we're at and how we can go forward from here.

**MR. NOLAN:**

The bill that's before the Legislature today is based on changes that were enacted by the State earlier this year and signed into law by Governor Spitzer. After that law was passed, new legislation was introduced that would amend the State law, but it has not been acted upon yet. So the bottom line is the law that's before you today the Legislature may enact, and if the underlying State law is changed later, we'll have to amend our Local Law to reflect that. What's before you now reflects what is the law of the State of New York, and my understanding is revisions have not been passed yet up in Albany. I'm checking the website of the New York State Assembly and Senate.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

George, what is the date on the language that you have?

**MR. NOLAN:**

Which law?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I've got a copy of S-6509, and this copy -- I want to read before I speak. The copy that I have in my mind hand --

**MR. NOLAN:**

It's an Assembly bill?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

This is the Senate same-as.

**MR. NOLAN:**

Okay.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Yeah, I don't know what the status of this is, but the changes -- the changes that I mention are reflected in the copy that I have here.

**MR. NOLAN:**

There was a Senate bill passed, delivered to the Assembly, that's the last notation. Let me just go back to the Assembly Bill.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

So it shows that the new legislation has been passed in the Senate but is still pending in the Assembly, so we're awaiting Assembly action.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Okay.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

George, we can go ahead and pass the resolution before us today, that reflects current State law, and if they make changes up in Albany then we can come back and make changes thereafter.

**MR. NOLAN:**

Correct.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Okay, thank you. Okay. Anything else for Tom? No? Very good.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Question.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Alden.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

So our bill that we're going to be considering today requires that --

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Cold War Recognition Corticate.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

-- Cold War Recognition, which some guys just on an arbitrary basis can't get. But that's -- is that a New York State requirement right now?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

In the law that was signed -- in the bill that was signed by the Governor, yes.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Okay.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good. Okay? Thanks, Tom.

We'll go to the **Introductory Resolution** before us today:

**IR 2097-07 - Adopting a Local Law to establish a Cold War Veterans Property Tax Exemption (Romaine).** Everybody has before them the fiscal impact statement. Thank you, I appreciate it. So that's before everybody. So --

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

Motion to approve.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Motion to approve by Legislator Eddington.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

Second.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Second by Legislator Schneiderman. All in favor? Any opposed?  
Any abstentions? **Motion carries (VOTE: 4-0-0-1 Not Present: Legislator Cooper).**

Any other items? Any other items? No? Very good. I'll take a motion to adjourn.

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

Motion.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Okay, and I'll second. We are adjourned. Thank you.

*(\*The meeting was adjourned at 1:32 P.M. \*)*

*{ } - Denotes Spelled Phonetically*