

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, 725 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on January 25, 2010.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Leg. Steven H. Stern, Chairman
Leg. Jack Eddington, Vice Chair (excused absence)
Leg. Jon Cooper
Leg. Daniel P. Losquadro
Leg. Edward P. Romaine

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

William J. Lindsay, Presiding Officer
Leg. Thomas Cilmi, Tenth District
George Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature
Sarah Simpson, Assistant Counsel
Bennie Pernice, Budget Review Office
Laura Halloran, Budget Review Office
Ben Zwirn, County Executive's Office
Steve Tricaraco, Aide to County Executive
Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency
Barbara LoMoriello, Deputy Clerk
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Leader
Linda Bay, Aide to Minority Leader
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
Rob Calarco, Aide to Leg. Eddington
Dot Kerrigan, AME Legislative Representative
Rick Brand, Newsday
Michael Pitcher, Aide to Presiding Officer
First Lt. Louis Delli-Pizzi, Army National Guard, Fighting 69th
Beth Delli-Pizzi, President, Family Readiness Group, Fighting 69th
Joe Sledge, Director, Public Affairs, Northport VA
Phil Weissbroat, Director, Facilities, Northport VA
Richard Kitson, Northport VA
And all other interested parties

VERBATIM MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

VERBATIM MINUTES TRANSCRIBED BY:

Denise Weaver, Legislative Aide

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:46 AM

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Welcome everyone to the Committee on Veterans and Seniors. I'm going to ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance, which I'm sure everybody will agree would be very appropriate if it was led by Lieutenant Delli-Pizzi.

SALUTATION

I ask everybody to please remain standing and join us in a moment of silence as we continue to keep all of our brave men and women fighting for our freedom overseas in our thoughts and prayers. Thank you.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

Before we begin, just note for the record that Legislator Eddington will not be joining us today. He has an excused absence.

We have a few items on the agenda today. I'm sure, like myself, my colleagues have questions as we learn more about the so-called surge in Afghanistan and our efforts ongoing there, questions about what that means for our local servicemen and women, what that means for our local businesses, what that means for our local families. And so really it is a great pleasure for me to welcome First Lieutenant Lou Delli-Pizzi and Beth Delli-Pizzi to join us today to speak to us about their experiences and what they think. You know, current events and news regarding our efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere are going to have on our local servicemen and women. So it's a pleasure to welcome you today. Why don't you guys come on up and you can have a seat at the table.

Good morning.

LT. DELLI-PIZZI:

Good morning.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Welcome. Welcome, thanks so much for being with us.

I guess, the overriding question here is what does a so-called surge in Afghanistan mean for the Fighting 69th, for the men and women who serve in the Fighting 69th and for their families coming up? And, you know, most importantly what are some of the issues that we should be aware of and some of the things that we can do to help both now and in the near future?

LT. DELLI-PIZZI:

Sure. I can talk a little bit about the public information that is open source. In terms of on a small scale in Suffolk County and myself how the surge will or won't affect us is that our current unit is subject to what's called a sourcing document. And that's somewhere before a mobilization order and the Fighting 69th would fall under that sourcing document looking at a deployment somewhere in late 2011. That puts us right now returning from Afghanistan. We're kind of in a reset phase and we'll be starting to step our training more and more in the coming months.

More particularly, the Fighting 69th has about a 1,000 soldiers, almost 500 of them live on Long Island. And also in that parent brigade of the 69th is the 27th brigade. There's also a large number of soldiers from the 27th brigade that also live, work and reside in Long Island. So if we're looking to project out front, I think by the end of next year we should be expecting to see a mobilization

process start to happen. And, of course, that sourcing document could change, it could shift left or right either way.

The morale is pretty high in the unit. They're a great bunch of soldiers. Almost all of them, the 500 guys from Long Island and Suffolk County are good hard working members of the community, family members. A lot of them are Suffolk County employees and policemen and they're volunteer firemen, doctors, lawyers and really a good bunch of people that we're very proud of.

I think an important thing that's going to affect Suffolk County also is next year around this time the armories in Suffolk County and Nassau County are scheduled to be closed. And they're scheduled to consolidate them in one place on Route 110 near the Republic Airport. So that will have a significant impact in terms of the National Guard. And also it won't just be National Guard. It will be reserve units as well. And that's how I believe that the surge will affect us on our small scale.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

The Fighting 69th, you know, it seemed like returned just yesterday. But when was the return?

LT. DELLI-PIZZI:

The main body got back about a year ago. So most of the soldiers are home around 12 months.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And are there still any members of the 69th that have not yet returned that are still on active duty?

LT. DELLI-PIZZI:

There are a very small number; less than five, I believe, that are still on active duty and still overseas and that was a voluntary extension on their part. And there's one or two that remain on active duty at medical facilities. There's also a large number that are in the community based medical program where they're released to live in their community in Suffolk County and then they occasionally see medical doctors. And also the reserve unit on this case, the 69th, we also track them as well.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And we're going to be hearing from Director Ronayne and from members of the veterans facility and talk about care for our returning veterans in just a moment. But I'd be interested to hear from you guys, you know, what if anything are you seeing, you know, regarding the need for services, the level of services being provided to those who've returned?

LT. DELLI-PIZZI:

Well, we're real lucky here in Suffolk County because we work very closely with Tom Ronayne so he's been able to really shrink our unemployment rate quite a bit with a lot of job referrals and also social services referrals.

I think when you look at what's going on in society, you'll see as the economy shrinks a little bit it becomes more and more difficult -- everyone's feeling the pinch. And we're feeling it, too, on the reserve side, too. So we're also having similar mental health issues, we're having -- seeing a little spike in narcotics use, illegal substance use as well. And we're working closely with the VA and some other groups to keep that as small as possible.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And, Beth, how are you seeing -- in working with families, issues that they are dealing with today, issues that they need to be aware of? As Lou points out that things could change. We're looking at a deployment coming up. What are some of the things that they're working through? And, again, what are some of the things that we can be aware of and help?

MS. DELLI-PIZZI:

You know, I think at this point in time we're trying to get the family sort of back together as a unit.

So New York State, you know, really leads the country in -- it's called now Strong Bond Seminars that the families and couples can go to for family counseling and marriage enrichment counseling. Family programs for New York Army National Guard just came out with their schedule for 2010. And I think we have, you know, there are probably 20 seminars that are scheduled for this year. We have one -- actually, I think, one coming up in Garden City. They usually are at a resort, you know, that the family and couples can go for the weekend. Suffolk County, we have some coming -- one coming up in Montauk over the summer. So we see that helping out families.

A lot of families, of course, are going to the VA. A lot of the soldiers are. We're trying to really push that. We have seen a lot of post traumatic stress. And you see the families encouraging the soldiers to go and get the help. So I think working closely with the VA, they've been wonderful. We also work with the Rosen Center through North Shore Hospital. And they're providing a lot of counseling.

So right now we're trying to focus on getting the families back together and sort of keep the deployment a little further away because it's a long time, you know, 2011, the end of 2011. And, you know, what you find with the families, especially with the wives, at this point in time you don't want to bring it up too much. But what we are doing is that our family readiness group, we're going to be expanding that. Because I think the big thing for this next deployment is when they went last time we had about -- this was 160 soldiers from Long Island. This time, as Lou said, we'll have about 500. So we're going to have, you know, it's going to be extraordinary and we're going to need more assistance that way.

So what we're hoping to do is set up smaller family groups within each armory or with each unit, because, you know, by then we will be at the one armory base. But it's going to be more important at that point in time to, you know, reach out to you and get your assistance. Because though everybody's going to be in one facility, our soldiers and their families are still going to be spread out all over Long Island. So we will -- it's going to be more difficult to get community support at that point in time than having somebody at each armory. So that's something that we will have to be working towards within the next year.

We are keeping our family readiness group up and going. The command wants that. And so we will be having periodic events to raise funds and to, you know, keep the families involved in what's going on and, you know, within the schedule of the next deployment.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Certainly regarding upcoming events if there is anything that we as a committee and I'm sure all of our individual offices would stand ready to assist you anyway that we can, of course.

MS. DELLI-PIZZI:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Presiding Officer.

P.O. LINDSAY:

I had the same reaction that Steve did. It seems like it was just yesterday we are at the Community College to give the 69th a good send-off. And I can't believe you're back a year already and that we're already talking about deploying again.

I just want to thank both of you for what you do to keep the people in our community together through these really, really troubling times. I can't imagine the families facing another deployment next year. The employers that employ the fellows, you know. It's great that Tom's, you know, finding employment for the guys and gals. But it makes it very difficult on an employer when you know you're going to be deployed again next year. The strain is really something.

I had a nephew that got back from Iraq last year and he had a lot of issues and he still has a lot of issues. It takes a long, long time to get back in the flow of society. And I just wish you well.

And I, like Steve, will, you know, anything we can do to if you have any events or something, you want us there, I'll be very happy to come and support you in any way we can because I really, really appreciate what you're doing for our community and the men and women that sacrifice their lives for us. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Anybody else? Thanks so much as always for being with us and of course for everything that you do. Thank you.

LT. DELLI-PIZZI:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director Ronayne, come on up.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good morning, Chairman, members, Presiding Officer. Thank you as always again for the invitation to appear before you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

What's going on?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

There are a few things going on in the community. But before I begin, I would like on behalf of myself, my family and my staff to extend our condolences to Legislator Romaine on the loss of his -- recent loss of his father. Legislator Romaine's father was a veteran and certainly part of our veterans community and he will be missed.

Again, there are number of things taking place in the community. Obviously we continue to work very closely with Lieutenant Delli-Pizzi and Beth in the Fighting 69th. We have obviously other units on the Island in Suffolk County that we also work closely with.

But I would like to bring to your attention today what only two weeks ago I learned to be a new army reserve unit here in Suffolk County operating out of the Armed Forces Reserve Center in Amityville. They're sharing a house with the Navy and the Marine Corps. And this would be the US Army Reserve Unit 455 Engineer Detachment. I learned of their existence about two weeks ago through a telephone call from, of all things, the woman who heads up their FRG making me aware of their pre-deployment briefing that will be taking place on Sunday, February 7th, 9:00 AM at the reserve center. So this is a recently formed unit and they are already deploying, which I found interesting.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Do you know how many -- approximately how many members are in that unit?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

It's a small unit. Right now I think there are about 30 members. Of the 30 I was told that 19 would be deploying immediately. I don't know what the status of the remaining members of that unit would be. But, again, our military presence, though slight, is continuing to increase here in Suffolk County.

We also have an event taking place tomorrow for anyone who is interested. This is an event being hosted by Long Island MacArthur Airport. It is celebrating the 130th birthday of General Douglas MacArthur. But more to the point, they will be awarding the General Douglas MacArthur Leadership

Award to one of our Suffolk County residents who is a veteran, served in Iraq, Afghanistan and is also a Suffolk County police officer. He'll be honored tomorrow afternoon at 4:00 PM at Long Island MacArthur Airport for anybody who is not aware of that event.

Aside from those public type events, I would just like to remind you February 4th, 6:00 PM at the Dennison Building, I would extend an invitation to each of the members and the Presiding Officer obviously, we will be hosting our annual Veterans Recognition evening where the County Executive and I present awards to various veterans from the community who have been nominated by the various veterans service organizations for distinguishing themselves in some way within the community. We do this event annually. We also recognize certain members of our military units on the Island, who, again, have distinguished themselves in some way.

But the -- for lack of a better word, the highlight of the evening unfortunately is that we take this opportunity to also honor our newest Gold Star families. We will be presenting these families with the Suffolk County Medal for Distinguished Military Service. Again, this year we have two new families that we will be honoring. Again, it's the smallest number that we've done in the last five years, unfortunately it's two too many. But, again, that is a very, very important event and we look forward to it.

We'll also be returning the belongings -- I don't think I've reported on this. To make a short story long, I was recently contacted by a US representative for the European War Dead Cemeteries. He's the fellow that makes sure that the cemeteries that have American war dead are properly maintain throughout Europe. He had been contacted by a French official through the American Embassy. Long story short, a farmer working in a field in a town called Metz, M-e-t-z, in northern France right on the German border, was working his field and he unearthed a pouch. Upon opening the pouch he discovered that it contained the belongings of an American soldier. There were dog tags. There was a US army pendant, medallion. There was a ring and some other belongings that had been buried apparently since World War II. There was very little information that they were able to obtain from the information on the dog tags. They were able to determine his name, when he entered service and the fact that Suffolk County, New York was his home of record. That's how it found its way to me.

With a very, very brief investigation we were able to locate the veteran's family. As it turns out, he returned home in 1946. He died in 1948. He did take time out in 1947 to get married. And that marriage resulted in one son. Remarkably the widow and the son continue to this day -- that's not entirely true. The wife passed away several weeks ago but the son and the widow had continued to live in that very same home for all of these years. We were able to communicate with them and they will be attending -- the son will be attending with other family members this event. And we will reunite the family with the belongings of this soldier that had been long buried in the field in Germany.

We don't know how or why or -- there's plenty of speculation as to why this would have been done. And the consensus amongst the veterans seems to be that the only reason a soldier would be in the field in a place like that during the time that he had served, would rid himself of those types of belongings was that he may have feared that he was in danger of being captured by the Germans and, therefore, relieved himself of anything that would identify him as an American soldier. We don't know that that's the case but that's everybody's best guess.

So that's a pretty remarkable story. It becomes very, very in-depth. I won't go into that here, but it's really remarkable. Some really interesting and remarkable people, exceptional folks have become involved in this process. And, again, that'll take place also on February 4th.

We continue to see our veterans, their families. We have been working very closely -- for some reason this time of year we normally see an uptick in clients. Normally that uptick is the result of approaching deadlines; March 1st being a deadline for the application of real property tax exemptions in the towns and so forth. We see a lot of veterans coming in with -- asking for

assistance in processes like that. This year the uptick in numbers seems to be genuine pursuit of services. We're having a lot of people come in for claims prosecution, as Lieutenant Delli-Pizzi had said. We're seeing a lot of PTSD. Certainly these multiple deployments are a factor in the uptick in the numbers of PTSD cases that we are seeing.

Very fortunately, we have Northport as our VA facility and we've got some representatives here today from Northport. They are doing an exceptional, exceptional job over there. To put a final point on it, the OEF/OIF or Operation Iraqi Freedom Operation, Enduring Freedom clinic is just superb. Veterans from Iraq or Afghanistan enter the hospital, go through this walk-in clinic. And they will see a doctor that day. They are being very well taken care of. They are being tracked. There is plenty of follow-up and plenty of casework to make sure that they continue to receive the services that they so very much need. And I commend the folks at Northport; not only the staff and the administration, but certainly the clinicians and the providers because they're the folks in the trenches actually doing the work and really making the difference in our veterans' lives. So we're very happy to see that.

I'd also just very briefly like to comment on the program that Beth had mentioned about the Strong Families. It's delightful, it's so refreshing to see that we're finally beginning to take a more serious look at the impact on the families that these wars are having. Certainly the multiple deployments are placing tremendous strain on family, both for the service member deployed and for the family members left behind. It's difficult enough to have a loved one go to war once, but to have that loved one go to war two, three and four times, is just unimaginable. And we can all appreciate the types of strains that that must place on a marriage, on a relationship between the soldier and the children, the relationship with his community or her community. So the fact that these programs are starting to come online and address the needs of the families as a unit and not only the soldier, I think is just long overdue and is to be commended.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, we had spoken moments ago about the current status of applications for benefits, disability benefits, compensation. I recall that number being not just in the thousands, but like the hundreds of thousands. And based on what you're seeing, I mean, what if any improvement has there been? And these days if you're going to make an application for those types of benefits, do we have any general rule on what the expected wait time is?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

There is some variance in the wait. The OIF/OEF veterans, there is a fast track in place for certain veterans. They are trying to address those claims on an expedited basis largely because there are so many of them. The backlog unfortunately, and we have experts from VA here that can speak more intelligently than I on what the real numbers are, but there are different statistics floating around. My latest understanding is that the backlog in pending claims has risen from about 600,000 to just under one million.

Again, there are other reports that counter that and show the number going the other way. But, again, I will leave that to the VA representatives, who I hope I'm not putting on the spot, but I think can, again, better answer that question.

It's still not good. The wait is extensive. The VA has stated that they intend to do a considerable amount of hiring in the next couple of years. Unfortunately, as with any business when you hire new people, the unintended impact initially is that there is actually a downward movement in the curve because the experience level, the new folks have to be trained by the experienced folks and that takes them away from what they're doing as a part of their regular assignment.

So we are hopeful that it will improve. Secretary Shinseki has made this one of his priorities and stated that -- simply stated that it will improve. And we're anxious to see that be the case.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director Sledge.

MR. SLEDGE:

Good morning. Thank you.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Can you state your name for the record.

MR. SLEDGE:

Yes. My name is Joe Sledge. I'm the Public Affairs Officer at the Northport Veterans Affairs Medical Center. With me is Philip Weissbroat; he's our Facility Planner. And Richard Kitson, our newly appointed Voluntary Service Officer. And it's our pleasure to be here today.

We came primarily to speak about the efforts between the County and Northport VA and establishing the East End Veterans Clinic. However, given the discussion this morning, I think it's important that we address some of the items that were covered.

First and foremost, the issue of the deployment of the 69th and the VA's ability to provide the services that they need when they return, I'm pleased to let you know that in -- since the start of the war -- what's it, eight or nine years ago, the medical center has grown significantly in the number of staff and other resources in place to take care of Operation Enduring and Iraqi Freedom Veterans. We have seen that program grow very large to the point we're now looking to move them again to a larger location where all the services can be consolidated.

Of course, in addition to the comprehensive team of medical and mental health experts who provide case management and other medical support services, they have at their disposal the entire medical center team for their other care needs. So we're very glad to hear that that's working for them. As the need continues to grow, we will continue to address what we have and we need. And so far if history is any judge, we'll be able to get whatever the resources are that are needed to take care of them.

The issue of veterans claims, I'm not -- for those who are not familiar with the structure of the VA, we three work for Veterans Health Administration. We work in partnership with Veterans Benefits Administration under the umbrella of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Our piece of the compensation and pension process is really to provide the compensation and pension exams at the medical center. I wish I could speak with some degree of knowledge about the claims processing in the Veterans Regional Office in Manhattan. What I know is what's already been stated, that there certainly has been and continues to be a backlog in the claims; and that we've been assured at the facility level in Northport that that backlog is being actively addressed by the secretary, by the regional directors of the Veterans Benefits Administration regional offices. And as Tom Ronayne pointed out, there are certain fast tracks, certainly those for Iraqi and Enduring Freedoms veterans and for veterans who are, I believe, 70 years or greater.

Other than that, I really can't address specifically the reason or the number for the backlogs, although Tom did touch upon the fact that I believe for a while the VA regional offices were not hiring. And so within the last year-and-a-half I believe they have been hiring staff. And as Tom pointed out, training those staff to be knowledgeable about the systems and the process in determining claims is going to be, probably, one that will take some time.

If you'd like, I'd be happy to see if we can get somebody from the VA Regional Office to come and

speak before this group so that they can speak intelligently on what's going on. So that's certainly a commitment we can make.

We invited Mr. Kitson here because we're very, very honored. As many of you know, Mr. Kitson is the President of Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 11, which has worked with Suffolk County for many, many years to improve the services and the programs for Vietnam veterans and all veterans, particularly at the Northport VA Medical Center.

When I look back at when I came into the VA, almost 18 years ago, I think that we needed to build -- we needed to do some bridge building between the Vietnam veteran community and I think we've done that quite successfully. We conduct routinely now Vietnam veteran outreach events where we invite Vietnam veterans to the medical center, give them an Agent Orange registry exam appointment, make them aware of the presumed medical conditions -- the conditions that are presumed -- related to exposure to Agent Orange and other chemicals that were used in the theatre of operations; and to ensure that they also receive other support services like mental health because as many of you know, many Vietnam veterans have also suffered with post traumatic stress disorder.

So we're moving forward with those programs. We're continuing to outreach to all of the veterans while we certainly have our eye on Iraqi and Enduring Freedom veterans and their very special needs at this point in their lives, we haven't taken our eyes off of the Vietnam veteran, the Korean War veteran and the World War II veteran. They also have very unique and special needs.

You may have seen recently a lot of coverage on homeless veterans. We continue to expand our programming for homeless veterans. Just a couple of years ago we had maybe two or three homeless veteran staff; that number is upward to about 14 or 15. And it's a very comprehensive program. We work in tandem with the Salvation Army, residents on the grounds of the VA and with United Veteran Beacon House, Family and Children Services and other support services for the homeless. One of the things that we're very proud of is our ability to work with a number of organizations that take care of veterans and their families.

One of the partnerships we're most proud of is our partnership with Suffolk County in establishing a veterans clinic. It was probably the better part of 13 or 14 years ago when Mr. Kitson, as the President of VVA Chapter 11 and Dennis Krulder, the President of the Disabled American Veterans Chapter, approached the VA and the County asking for this clinic. And it's a long, a longtime coming and there have been a lot of meetings and a lot of site searches. And I'm very, very pleased to say that we are absolutely going to be moving into the County seat at Riverhead with the assistance and the support of all of you here today and especially Tom Ronayne, the County Executive and all of the staff that have been supportive.

Phil Weissbroat, as I said, our Facility Planner, has really taken a lead with that in working with the County so I'll turn it over to Phil to let you know exactly where we are and when we anticipate opening up that clinic. Thank you.

MR. WEISBROAT:

We're excited to possibly occupy next fall. We've been working with Tom Ronayne and Tom LaGuardia. It's going to be incredible for the veterans that are out there in terms of the distance, what we're able to provide is going to be primary care examine rooms. There's going to be mental health rooms where they're going to be able to do group therapy.

Additionally, which this clinic is going to support is we're looking to bring out Telehealth to the veterans as well; for those that are home can go back and forth with staff. It'll set them up at home. This is going to be an incredible opportunity. It's not a pilot. We did something similar in Nassau County years ago, which we're still working on and building. And it's just wonderful that we're able to do it out here.

The important thing for myself as Planner for Long Island is when we're out there, we're always looking for a great site where all the veterans can get there, where there's public transportation, where they're able to drive there, where we're able to bring services closer. And this was probably the best location that we could have ever dreamed for. And to be able to work with the County has been wonderful. And we just can't wait to get this clinic started. It's going to be about 4,000 square feet. And like I said, it's going to bring out an opportunity out here to serve every veteran. And it's something that everybody's worked for for years to bring forward including Mr. Kitson. And we're really thankful.

When I mentioned to the Director that we would be here Friday, you know, the Friday that just passed, he would have wanted to be here. He's out of state. And he really wanted to come here and thank you himself. This has been a wonderful opportunity so far, as you know, between the County, between contractual and everything else that's involved. The staff that you've given us, like Tom Ronayne and Tom Laguardia and others, they've been nothing but wonderful. And we're looking forward to completing this. We're hoping you're all going to be there when it opens up and we're going to build it up. You know, we start off, some veteran is going to hear about it and little by little it's going to pick up speed. And we're really eager to get that process started.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Quick question.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Losquadro.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Thank you, Mr. Weisbroat. I just wanted to clarify one thing. I know it's still very early in the year so when you said next fall, did you mean this fall?

MR. WEISBROAT:

This fall, this fall.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

I just wanted to clarify. I just wanted to make sure because that seemed, you know, a long ways away if it was next fall. But I was pretty certain you meant this fall so I just wanted to clarify. That's very good news. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Romaine.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Yes, I'm very interested in this because I've advocated this for a longtime. I represent three of the eastern towns: Shelter Island, Southold, Riverhead and all of eastern Brookhaven from Sound to bay. So obviously this is right in the middle of my catchment area. And it's something that is desperately needed.

You are going to have elevated transportation and a separate entrance since this -- the location on which, by the way, I wasn't too keen on, I have to say that right away because there's other areas on the East End that have public transportation, but this is on the second floor; so I assume the County is providing elevator transportation and a separate entrance?

MR. WEISBROAT:

Yes.

LEG. ROMAINE:

And I assume that the County will provide additional parking?

MR. WEISBROAT:

Yes. Under the rules we were told is basically they could only provide handicap. They couldn't provide veterans specific if they weren't handicap parking. But again, we're thrilled to be there. We saw a lot of parking there when we were there. And to have a separate entrance for the clinic, everything is falling into place.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Right. I just hope that there is sufficient parking. That's a big concern of mine. I lived in that building for 16 years as County Clerk. I know the parking. I know that that parking lot and that back parking lot gets jammed up right away. I know there's overspill from the courts. I'm just concerned that there's sufficient parking there. And that's something that I would not expect you to respond to, but I will obviously take that up with Public Works because I want to make sure that veterans going there -- and let me ask you this: One of the problems with veterans, particularly from the East End is that they're going to go to the VA Center in Northport for treatment, usually there would be bus transportation. They'd have to find their way to Riverhead, even if they lived in Greenport, which is 45 minutes away or Montauk and Amagansett, at least 45 minutes away. And then they would have to hop on a bus and go to Northport. That bus would usually leave at 7 AM. They'd probably get to Northport around 9 because of the stops. And they'd have to get all their treatments and try to get back to the bus by 1:00. So this is a big improvement.

I assume that we'll work with providing bus transportation that will now branch out to both forks as well and to actually run east from Brookhaven, from eastern Brookhaven, run east into Riverhead so that people looking for just basic treatment, not the more specialist type of treatment that you find in Northport, we'll be able to do that. I assume you're going to be working on transportation routes and reaching out and notifying veterans as well?

MR. SLEDGE:

Legislator Romaine. First let me say, yes, we do appreciate the tremendous support that you've given the East End Clinic concept. We know that you've voiced a need for this for quite some time and we appreciate that.

With regard to transportation, the medical center relies on the Disabled American Veterans Transportation Volunteer Network to take veterans to and from their clinic appointments. Those are veterans who have travel hardships.

At this point, I don't believe we have a firm decision or even a commitment from the DAV to go east of the Riverhead clinic for this transportation program. Again, the initial goal here was to establish the East End Clinic for the veterans.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Sure. Well, I'll be looking to work with the County and my colleagues from the Legislature to ensure that we work with Tom Ronayne and the others to make sure that the DAV provides some type of transportation network. We do have a bus system. We have one bus route for the east end, S92, which makes a U from Greenport all the way over to East Hampton. So we do have that.

We don't have train service. We may not have train service unless we breakaway and form a Peconic Bay Transportation Authority, which I had a press conference on this morning with Assemblyman Alessi because of the MTA's foolish comments that they were going to cut train service east of Ronkonkoma on the main line in, which is absolutely incredible.

But I am very interested in how we get -- we transport veterans particularly those who have medical needs and how we get them to the County Center in a reasonable amount of time so that they can get service and not have run out to catch the bus to get back. So that's a concern of mine.

And while this center is a step forward, it really is, and I commend the VA for being willing to do

this, this is an excellent thing and I commend the County. I don't know if the County Center, the second floor is the best location, but I'm concerned about parking and I'm concerned about transportation because I do want veterans to use this in great numbers. And as it gets closer, my office just established an online newsletter, which we e-mailed to thousands of residents in my district. We will make sure that we include this in our monthly newsletters to make sure that everyone is aware of the opening date and they can make their appointments accordingly.

MR. SLEDGE:

Thank you so much.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Mr. Presiding Officer.

P.O. LINDSAY:

Anything the County does takes awhile. It's like a marathon where you have to pass the baton. I worked on this project eight or nine years ago with then Legislator Caracciolo. And I'm happy to see it's finally done. And the core component here was Richie Kitson. He was involved from the beginning and is still here at the end. And I just salute your persistence, Rich, for being such an advocate for this much, much needed facility.

MR. KITSON:

I just want to say thank you, Mr. Lindsay, and it's nice to have lived long enough to see it come to fruition.

LAUGHTER

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I wanted to say something similar. That obviously Mr. Kitson's been involved for years and years and working hard with so many -- so many that have come and gone and seeing it through. And it's great to see that we are looking at the finish line.

I would also say that one of the things I think about often is Legislator Romaine telling the story, as he did frequently, about his dad and his needs and how long it would take him to --

LEG. ROMAINE:

My father was a hundred percent disabled veteran.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

So this is really great to hear and great to see; that it's something that everybody's been working so hard on for so long and that we're so close. And certainly details that need to be continued to be worked out along the way, of course, but it's great to see a need being fulfilled. So, thank you.

MR. KITSON:

I might just add one thing for the record. There's a gentleman by the name of Dennis Krulder who is the past Commander for the State of New York Disabled American Veterans. His wife is gravely ill, otherwise he would have been here today, who is also equally a part of the initial thought. And I'm sure -- his efforts are all voluntary but he's responsible for transporting, as we have accumulated the numbers over last year, more than 70,000 veterans to the Northport VA Hospital on a voluntary basis.

So I'm sure, to Legislator Romaine's point, somehow someday we'll get those East End veterans to that clinic. And on behalf of all veterans in Suffolk County, I thank you, thank you very much gentlemen and ladies.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Good. Okay.

INTRODUCTORY RESOLUTION

We have an item on our agenda, introductory resolution, **IR-1039, Accepting and appropriating a State grant in the amount of \$10,000 from the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs in support of the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency's Outreach Program (Co. Exec. Levy)** I will make a motion to approve.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

I'll second the motion. I just have a quick question. Is it a hundred percent grant, could it be placed on the consent calendar?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

It is a hundred percent. And the motion will be to place it on the consent calendar.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Legislator Losquadro. Okay. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? Motion is approved. **APPROVED and Placed on the Consent Calendar (VOTE: 4-0-0-1 Not Present: Legislator Eddington)**

Okay. Anybody else? All right. Very good. Well, thank you. Thank you everybody for being with us today.

THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 12:32 PM

{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY