

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 August 8, 2011.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Leg. Steven H. Stern, Chairman
Leg. Sarah Anker, Vice Chair (not present)
Leg. Vivian Vilorio-Fisher
Leg. Edward P. Romaine
Leg. Lou D'Amaro

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Renee Ortiz, Chief Deputy Clerk
Eric A. Kopp, County Executive's Office
Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Leader
Dot Kerrigan, AME 3rd VP
Rick Meyer, AME 3rd VP
Jack Caffey, Aide to Presiding Officer
William Shilling, Aide to Leg. Anker
Tom Ryan, Aide to Leg. Vilorio-Fisher
Justin Littell, Aide to Leg. D'Amaro
And all other interested parties

VERBATIM MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:35 AM

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Welcome everyone to the Committee on Veterans and Seniors. I ask everyone to please join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Romaine.

SALUTATION

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

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

Thank you. Welcome everyone. Thanks so much for being with us today. We do not have legislation on the agenda today, but we are joined by our Director, Director Ronayne. Thank you for being with us today, Director.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members. Thank you, again, for the invitation to appear before you.

As the Chairman stated when we had our opening, we had tragic losses over the weekend. We all heard of the helicopter being shot down and the loss of our 22 Navy SEALs. Being a Navy veteran, I may have a slightly more attuned appreciation to what the SEALs really are. And it's just -- it represents just an extraordinary, extraordinary loss. So, you know, my heart and prayers go out to the family and the loved ones of those SEALs. They are just quite literally the finest trained and most competent warriors on the face of the planet. They really -- they really serve our nation proud every day when they go to work.

There has not been a great deal going on; though there have been some significant events that I'd like to share with you. Certainly high on that list is -- we recently, last Monday, at Calverton National Cemetery, we gathered to inter the remains of a Korean War veteran that, I believe, I had mentioned at our last session. PFC John LaValle was a Korean War veteran. During Korea he was actually captured and he was a prisoner of war. We're told that he died while in captivity in Korea as a prisoner. And when his remains were not immediately returned, his status was changed from POW to MIA.

At some point subsequent to his death, his remains were repatriated, but they were unidentified. And was buried in what is known as the Punchbowl, which is an area in Hawaii where unidentified remains amongst others are interred.

Fairly recently, working with DNA samples that are provided by the family members of all or most of our MIA's, they were able to match the remains of one of these unknown veterans to the DNA of one of his surviving sisters. One of his sisters, I believe, lives in Pennsylvania; the other one is on the south shore of Suffolk County. And through that identification, they were able to bring him home. And after having been missing for 60 years, we were able to inter him respectfully and with honors in a military cemetery, in a veterans cemetery.

And, you know, obviously while the family had no expectation of his returning home and greeting them, starting that Tuesday morning, the day after the burial, at least the surviving family members now had a stone and a grave that they can visit and, you know, remember their loved one. So that was quite extraordinary. We don't see those very often, and certainly even fewer locally. So the return of PFC LaValle was quite significant.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:

Thanks for sharing that.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

It really was. You know, I must share with you, though, that some press releases were done, though remarkably enough, not through the VA and not through the Department of Defense. We tried to get some press and it was really not widely known. There were certainly -- those who should have been there, were there. But on that type of a burial, given its uniqueness and significance, we really thought that there would be quite a group. And that just wasn't the case. We were quite surprised by the small turnout, but nonetheless it was -- he was buried with dignity and respect and that's what we hope that we can provide for him and his family.

We recently also had a very nice event that was hosted or held at the in John Engeman Theatre in Northport that, I believe, many of you are familiar with. The Theatre is named after the -- in memory of John w. Engeman, who was killed in a helicopter crash about eight years ago. The O'Neil family -- Kevin O'Neil is the brother-in-law of the deceased soldier. And they brought this theatre back. And if you have not had the opportunity, I strongly recommend that you all attend an event there. It's really -- it's a Broadway caliber facility. They put on terrific productions. It's just a very, very nice place. And the veterans and those who have not returned are always in the forefront at the theatre.

The program was to benefit the Gold Star families, the Gold Star mothers and the Long Island Gold Star families to raise funds so that they have the ability to continue to provide support and assistance to those who require support and assistance. And it was actually a very nice time.

There have been several fundraisers. This was actually a fairly busy weekend. On Friday evening at the Brentwood American Legion, there was a fundraiser that was to benefit the Jacob's Light Foundation, Doreen {Kenny} and her efforts to provide care packages to our deployed troops. And in speaking with Doreen, she was able to share with me that they believe at their next packing, I do not have a date -- as soon as I get a date, I'll share it with you -- at their next packing, they will break the mark and exceed 500,000 pounds of care package products and materials being shipped to the troops. So that will be a real milestone event when that packing takes place. And, again, those at this point always take place at the Brentwood American Legion.

On Saturday there was a welcome-home ceremony welcoming Lance Corporal Anthony Mercato, United States Marine Corps. He flew in to Long Island McArthur and was greeted by a large contingent of veterans and the -- as we all know well now, the Patriot Guard Riders and several of the other veterans motorcycle organizations who provide escort for all manner of events, the homecoming being one of them. So he was greeted and welcomed home on Saturday.

On Sunday there was a benefit to benefit the 911 veterans that was founded and really made great inroads through the efforts of Steve Clark, who is longer with us; but is now being headed up by Chris Delaney. Chris is doing terrific work there. And that event was held on Saturday.

This coming Saturday there are two events taking place. Certainly the most important of which is the event being sponsored by Legislator Romaine. And that will be a Wounded Warrior fundraiser, also to benefit 911 veterans who just do an extraordinary job. I'd be happy to share with you as an aside some of the efforts and some of the things that they have accomplished. But I think Chris told me that this year they're on target to provide more than \$200,000 in assistance to those in need, which is really, if you think about it, just exceptional. It's a very, very small group of individuals who are doing exceptional work. So, that is very important.

LEG. ROMAINE:

If I may, the fundraiser is going to be Saturday at four o'clock at the Dowling Campus in Shirley.

They have an athletic field there. And the Suffolk County Police Officers have a soccer team that are going to face off against the soccer team sponsored by Center Moriches Fire Department. Myself and Town Councilman Dan Panico are sponsoring this entire event to raise money. A hundred percent of the proceeds go to 911. And we're collecting all types of materials for the 106 to send, you know, soap, toothpaste, the normal types of things that you would collect. So that's going to be at Dowling at their Shirley Campus on Saturday at four o'clock.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And if anybody had that on their calendar, originally it was at two PM. And that's now been changed to four.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Right, but the police officers don't get off so they had to push it back to four o'clock.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Just to make people aware that there was a change in time.

LEG. ROMAINE:

We advertised in the local newspapers.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Outstanding. And, again, as long as you mention the 106, the 106, they're out there. They're probably the single largest military entity that we have on the Island right now. I think their numbers right now number about 1500 troops. They -- they're a little bit unique in that they don't deploy in very, very large numbers. But they are almost continuously deployed in some fashion. They've always got folks over in Iraq or Afghanistan.

And these guys are executing missions that, you know, we just don't often think about. Everybody assumes that they're going over and providing support and logistical assistance and things like that. But these guys are not only in the air, but they have their PJ's, their para-rescue men who are jumping into conduct medical evacuations and rescues behind enemy lines. They're rescuing wounded folks. They have forward air controllers. These are guys who drop in by parachute or make their way across ground well inside of enemy lines to call in air support and so forth.

So they are not just flying over packages of support and handling logistics. These guys are really quite literally up to their necks in the fight. And they also do an extraordinary job. Not to mention that they are at the forefront of the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief efforts on Long Island at this point with regard to anything that might occur. Hopefully it would be natural disasters, God forbid, if anything, and not manmade. But hurricanes and floods and anything else that might take place, 106 is at the forefront of those efforts. So they do a terrific job.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Yes, if I could, over the weekend, and I have an e-mail from George Sullivan. For those who don't know, George Sullivan is the Tax Receiver of Southold. But he's also a retired United States Marine Corps personnel that lost his leg in Vietnam and one of the four/five people that are on the Vietnam Memorial Monument Committee. This November 11th, they're going to be celebrating a 20-year rededication ceremony.

He wanted to tell me that his inspection of the site revealed that the facilities were damaged and in disrepair. And a list had been provided to the Parks Department, but none of those repairs or damages seems to be -- being dealt with. And he was concerned about that. He came up to me and said, you know, "Eddie, we got to do something here. This is our monument for returning veterans from Vietnam, like myself. I've been on the board here. And it seems that there's been a lack of maintenance of this facility. And we'd like to see that addressed before we do the

rededication ceremony in November."

So I said, "George, I'll tell you what. Send me an e-mail. I'm at the Vets Committee tomorrow. And our Chairman's very interested as are the members. And I'll raise this issue and see if we can get some action on this."

So, I turn that over to you. Maybe you've heard of this, Tom, or you can comment on this, if you have any knowledge of this.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, I certainly -- first of all, it's a beautiful monument, even with some of the maintenance issues outstanding. There are a number of items obviously that when you go up there and visit, that you would observe. I can tell you that last week I was driving back. It was last Saturday; a week ago Saturday. I was driving home from an event on the East End. And one when I passed, I actually was on North Ocean Avenue. As I passed, I observed something that caused me to go into the parking lot and loop around so that I make sure I saw what I thought I had seen. And there was a truck up on the pathway going toward the monument. And they were doing some sort of concrete or some sort of work on the base for the elevated sidewalk that is over there. So I'd be happy to visit the site.

LEG. ROMAINE:

This is what I would ask. George has been on this committee for well over 20 years. He lost his leg, as I said, in Vietnam. He is the Tax Receiver of Southold Town. What I would suggest is that you give George a call and that you ask for that list. Because he and his committee has a list of things that have not been maintained or have not been repaired, that are damaged that detract from the monument. And they are going to rededicate the monument on Veterans Day this year.

So if you could that, and maybe get back to this Committee, if I could ask Mr. Chairman, at our next meeting, I guess it would be in September, at our next meeting, give you enough time to ferret out what the issues are -- and I realize it's not your Department, let me make that clear, this is the Parks Department. Because he was talking to me about this. And he was saying that he felt that, you know, there just wasn't enough whatever to get this repaired. And I was like, "wow, it's the first time I've heard of this. George, I'll look into it."

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I'd be happy to contact him. You don't happen to have a phone number handy, do you?

LEG. ROMAINE:

No, I don't. But he is the Tax Receiver of Southold so I'm sure it's listed. And I'm sure you can give him a call. And, you know, he was very concerned about it. And I said, "George, I'll take care of it right away."

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Understandably so. And what I'll do is, I'll reach out to him. Hopefully he'll share with me that list. I'll make a visit up there. I'd be happy to meet with him there if that is what he would like.

LEG. ROMAINE:

He is one of the original members still on the committee for the monument and, you know, very interested in pursuing this.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

But, again, obviously, as you stated, it is not my department. I think Parks does wonderful work. I have an excellent rapport with the Parks Commissioner. I'll share with him that there are some concerns. And, you know, to the extent that I'm able, if I can contribute in some way toward

getting these things addressed, I will.

LEG. ROMAINE:

That's great. If you could pass that along, that would be wonderful.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Happy to do so.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Thank you so much.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Once again, I'll mention just for the record that in October the VA at Northport will be sponsoring the Vietnam Veterans Traveling Wall, the three quarter size replica, which is just an exceptional sight. If you haven't seen one, I would encourage you. I know most of you have. But in conjunction with the Traveling Wall visiting Northport, Northport will also be hosting and sponsoring their first ever Homeless Veterans Stand Down. We're working very closely with them.

And this might be an interesting opportunity to provide the committee members, we're working very closely, Suffolk County is, to support the VA in their preparation to produce the Stand Down. Their having not done one before, they're kind of looking to us because of our successes. But the one thing that -- we still have some opportunities available for our volunteers. If any of you have constituents in your districts that you think might have an interest in volunteering to work with us at the Stand Down, I promise you it's a very rewarding and fulfilling way to spend a day. We have many, many volunteers. Unfortunately with the Wall, the Stand Down and several other events taking place, there's a lot going on.

But the Stand Down will take place on October 28th at the Northport VA. And if you know of anybody who's interested in volunteering to assist, by all means, please have them contact my office and ask for David Rivera at our 853-VETS telephone number.

Briefly, I'll share with you the report on the progress of the expansion project that is taking place at Calverton National Cemetery. Calverton, as I've said in the past, is the single largest veterans cemetery in the United States. Right now we have in excess of 300,000 veterans interred. And we have a great deal more space to continue the wonderful work that they do.

There is a project in progress right now to provide an expansion that will allow for future interments well into the 2020's. So the work that is going on right now is progressing very nicely. They're clearing fields, providing areas for new burial sections as well as adding new roadways, irrigation systems, out buildings and so forth. And, again, the facility sits on 1200 acres. So there's a lot of room out there. It's a beautiful place. It's more of a park to me than a cemetery. Unfortunately I'm out there quite a bit. And it's really quite a beautiful place. I know it's in Legislator Romaine's District and he's been out there numerous times. It really is an extraordinary facility compared to so many of the other national cemeteries.

LEG. ROMAINE:

If I may, you could help me with my efforts with our Department of Public Works. I am trying to get a bus shelter located near the entrance to the cemetery on 25. It's one of three locations in my district. And I'm trying to get a bus shelter because I think that that would be useful. Most of the people drive there, but there are some people -- the County bus passes right in front of that cemetery. And it would be nice to think that we could get a bus Shelter there. Because we could encourage people to come by public transportation. And the shelter helps that because it allows people to, you know, if it's raining or snowing or whatever, to get out of the elements while they wait for the bus.

And, by the way, you should know, we have bus shelters in the maintenance yard. I just need one of them to be moved and a concrete bed to be put down in front of the cemetery. So maybe this is something that the Committee may want to weigh in on. Because I've been writing Commissioner Anderson about that. That and two other locations. But this one, like, comes to mind, like this is a national cemetery, the largest in the United States. We can't have a bus Shelter in front of there? And, by the way, they have bus shelters at Public Works.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And just for my clarification, you want a shelter on the westbound side, I'm assuming?

LEG. ROMAINE:

I want it on the north side of 25 near the entrance; the main entrance.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Which would be the westbound traffic side.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Yes. Yes, north side of 25. But that's -- you know, I mean we have the largest national cemetery in the United States. And it's just been a request of mine for the last year. I've been asking them, please, see if you can get a bus shelter there. So, if you could follow up on that, that would be great. Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And I would just close with a report on our Veterans Discount Program. We've been approaching merchants countywide. And it's been very well received. We're adding numerous new merchants every week. We will be publishing our first directory shortly. It is -- the participating merchants are listed on our website at this time, which is easily accessible. There's a link on the website that goes directly to it. And, again, anybody who has a merchant in your respective districts who might have an interest, we'd be happy to speak with them. And if we can get them on board, it's a win/win for everybody.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director, thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you. Have a good day.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Be well. Anybody else? All right. Take a motion to adjourn. Legislator Romaine. Second. And we are adjourned. Thank you.

**THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 11:57 AM
{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**