

**SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE  
SPECIAL MEETING  
FIFTH DAY**

**MARCH 13, 2003**

**MEETING HELD AT THE WILLIAM H. ROGERS LEGISLATURE BUILDING  
IN THE ROSE Y. CARACAPPA AUDITORIUM  
VETERANS MEMORIAL HIGHWAY, SMITHTOWN, NEW YORK**

**MINUTES TAKEN BY**

**LUCIA BRAATEN, COURT REPORTER**

***[THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 10:00]***

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Will all Legislators please come to the auditorium. All Legislators, please come to the auditorium. Mr. Clerk, please call the roll.

***(Roll Called by Mr. Barton, Clerk)***

**LEG. CARACCIOLO:**

Here.

**LEG. GULDI:**

(Not Present)

**LEG. TOWLE:**

(Not Present)

**LEG. FISHER:**

Here.

**LEG. HALEY:**

(Not Present)

**LEG. FOLEY:**

Present.

**LEG. LINDSAY:**

Here.

**LEG. FIELDS:**

Here.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Here.

**LEG. CARPENTER:**

Here.

**LEG. CRECCA:**

Yeah, here.

**LEG. NOWICK:**

Here.

**LEG. BISHOP:**

(Not Present)

**LEG. BINDER:**

Here.

**LEG. TONNA:**

Here.

**LEG. COOPER:**

Here.

**LEG. CARACAPPA:**

Here.

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Here.

**MR. BARTON:**

14 present. (Not Present at Roll Call: Legislators Guldi, Towle, Haley and Bishop)

**P.O. POSTAL:**

All rise for the salute to the flag, led by Legislator Fisher.

***(Salutation)***

Please, remain standing for a moment of silence in memory of the two undercover New York City Police Officers who were murdered in the line of duty, both of whom were also husbands and fathers of young children. So, in memory of those two valiant police officers, valiant public servants, I'd like a moment of silence.

***(Moment of Silence)***

You may be seated. Henry, please read the special meeting notice.

**MR. BARTON:**

Notice of a special meeting, dated March 10th, 2003. "To all County Legislators, from Robert J. Gaffney, Suffolk County Executive. Please be advised that a special meeting of the Suffolk County Legislature will be held on Thursday, March 13th, 2003, at 9:45 a.m. in the forenoon at the William H. Rogers Building, Hauppauge, New York, pursuant to Section 2-6(B) of the Suffolk County Administrative Code for the following purpose: A public portion, followed by the State of the County Address by the County Executive." It's signed by Robert J. Gaffney.

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Thank you. Are there any cards for the public portion?

**MR. BARTON:**

There are none.

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Is there anyone who wishes to speak? We will wait ten minutes, and then recess to 10:50 a.m., when the County Executive will deliver the State of the County Address. So -- there was no -- there were no cards.

**LEG. CARACCIOLO:**

Motion to close the public portion.

**P.O. POSTAL:**

All right.

**MR. SABATINO:**

Technically, what you could do is you could recess the meeting for 15 minutes, because that's the standard, then come back in 15 minutes, and with 14 votes, you can terminate the public portion.

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Okay. Do we have to close the public hearing -- public portion?

**MR. SABATINO:**

You have to close the public portion, but --

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Okay.

**MR. SABATINO:**

But, first, you've got to let 15 minutes go by.

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Okay.

**MR. SABATINO:**

So recess for 15.

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Okay. The meeting is recessed until 10:15.

***[THE MEETING WAS RECESSED AT 10:03 A.M. AND RESUMED AT 10:25 A.M.]***

Will all Legislators please return to the auditorium. Please, return to the auditorium. Okay. Will everyone please be seated. Is there anyone who -- can I have your attention, please? Is there anyone who wishes to address the Legislature? Hearing no one, I'll take a motion from Legislator Towle, seconded by Legislator Caracappa, to terminate the public portion. All in -- to waive the rules and terminate the public portion. All in favor? Opposed? The meeting is recessed --

**MR. BARTON:**

16.

**P.O. POSTAL:**

-- until 10:50 a.m.

***[THE MEETING WAS RECESSED AT 10:25 A.M. AND RESUMED AT 11:00 A.M.]***

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Will everyone please be seated. All Legislators, please come to the auditorium. Mr. Clerk, please call the roll.

***(Roll Called by Mr. Barton, Clerk)***

**LEG. CARACCIOLO:**

Here.

**LEG. GULDI:**

(Not Present)

**LEG. TOWLE:**

Here.

**LEG. FISHER:**

(Not Present).

**LEG. HALEY:**

Here.

**LEG. FOLEY:**

Present.

**LEG. LINDSAY:**

(Not Present)

**LEG. FIELDS:**

Here.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

(Not Present).

**LEG. CARPENTER:**

Here.

**LEG. CRECCA:**

(Not Present)

**LEG. NOWICK:**

Here.

**LEG. BISHOP:**

Here.

**LEG. BINDER:**

Here.

**LEG. TONNA:**

Here.

**LEG. COOPER:**

Here.

**LEG. CARACAPPA:**

Here.

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Here.

**LEG. LINDSAY:**

Legislator Lindsay's here.

**LEG. GULDI:**

Here.

**LEG. FISHER:**

Here.

**LEG. LINDSAY:**

Here.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Here.

**LEG. CRECCA:**

Here.

**MR. BARTON:**

18. All Legislators are present.

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Thank you. Having worked with our County Executive for many years, we have very often agreed on the best course of action to serve the people of Suffolk County. There are times when we have not agreed on the best way and the best course of action to come to the solution that we want to see, but I think that we've agreed on our commitment to the people of this county and to providing the best services and the necessary services for the people of the County. But I have only admiration and respect for him at this time, when we face this fiscal crisis. And he has reached out to the Legislature in a true spirit of cooperative solution, solutions and problem-solving. He's working as hard as anyone can possibly work to find those solutions. And I can only say that I'm very proud to be working with our County Executive, whom I introduce to you, County Executive Robert Gaffney.

***(Applause)***

**COUNTY EXECUTIVE GAFFNEY:**

Thank you. Thank you, and good morning, Presiding Officer Postal, Deputy Presiding Officer Caracappa, members of the Legislature, County Executive Suozzi, distinguished guests. And I'm just particularly pleased to have Tom Suozzi join us. We've been partners in an effort to address our mutual problems on a regional basis. And I just wanted to personally thank him for his support, for his friendship and for his leadership. Thank you, Tom.

***(Applause)***

And I also wanted to thank the Legislature. This is my -- this is my twelfth and final State of the County Address, and I have to tell you on the record that there is no better Legislature anywhere, certainly in New York State or anyplace else. We don't always agree, clearly, but it's been an absolute delight to be able to work with a Legislature of this quality, with the Presiding Officer -- with the Presiding Officers that we've had through the years. It's an outstanding body, and I appreciate all of your efforts through the years. And if it's true, that absence makes the heart grow fonder, I imagine that once -- maybe a year from now, I'm going to be very fond of all of you again. You may even find it in your heart to be fond of me.

But for now, we've got some serious work to do. You know, after years of steady progress and economic growth, County government finds itself being severely tested by a wave of economic forces that are outside of our control. The bad news is coming at us from many directions, but it's all hitting County government where it hurts the most, in the pocketbook. Even Mother Nature has been adding to our problems.

The Department of Public Works reports that the snow removal budget has been exhausted prior to last week's snow storm. But I think you can all agree that the County workforce has done a great job in keeping the County moving this winter, and so I'd ask you all to join me in thanking them for a job well done.

***(Applause)***

The economic environment in which we must confront the challenges that we face is one of uncertainty. Last week, the Federal Reserve Board reported that economic activity is subdued across the nation. It's an interesting word, "subdued". It's said that geopolitical and economic uncertainties are holding back businesses -- business and consumer spending. Certainly, uneasiness about the possibility of war, rising oil prices, and the impact that they're having on people's disposable income all mean uncertainty for Suffolk County's economic future. The stalemate in Albany over the State budget and just how much it will add to our burden is clouding our financial picture even further. But one thing is very certain, Suffolk County's financial situation has become more precarious since the Operating Budget was adopted in November.

You may recall that in December, we had projected a 25 million dollar gap in this year's budget. At the time, bad news from the State Pension Fund indicated that the County would have to pay 25 million dollars more than the amount that we had budgeted. It sounded like the worst possible news. But that dire projection assumed that a key stock market index, the Russell 3000, would rebound from a minus twenty to a minus ten by the end of this month. Unfortunately, the Russell 3000 has plummeted instead. Yesterday, it stood at minus thirty. And the most recent estimate that our pension fund contribution is that our pension fund contribution will be more than 110 million dollars, so our budget is 60 million dollars short. The County will collect only 53 million dollars in general fund property taxes this year. So the magnitude of the problem is pretty clear.

Then in late January, we're hit with bad news about the proposed State budget. It was not entirely unexpected, however, because what we are seeing is part of a national trend. Across the country, states are suffering multi-billion dollar deficits. New York is among the hardest hit.

When Wall Street was booming, it generated billions in revenues for the State of New York. Now that it's not, the State has a huge problem. And when states have problems, as we all know, they tend to shift costs down to local governments, and that's happening. That's why counties across the State are now projecting deficits themselves. The shifts that have been proposed would cost Suffolk County at least 20 million dollars a year, and another 33 million dollars in 2004. Now, these cost shifts come at a time when the County's payments to the State for Medicaid are already projected to increase by another 22 million dollars next year. Now, that's 22 million dollars that would no longer be available to provide important County services.

County Executive Suozzi and I have been working closely with other County Executives on just this issue. We made Medicaid reform the focus of our lobbying efforts this year. On Tuesday, we joined Mayor Bloomberg and County Executives from across the state in a show of unity on just this issue. We're urging the Governor and the Legislature to cap Medicaid contributions at 2001 levels.

Now, I know that the Presiding Officer has offered an innovative plan of her own, and I applaud

that. The plan is to give up three-quarters of a cent of the County's sales tax revenues to the State, if the State will take responsibility for funding Medicaid. That sounds more than fair. After all, it is a Federal and State program. And in most states, county taxpayers don't pay a single cent of Medicaid costs. But as things stand, Suffolk County taxpayers will pay 228 million dollars this year and 250 million dollars next year for a program over which we have absolutely no control. That's not just an unfunded mandate, it's a financial deadweight around the next neck of county government throughout New York.

Now, there is a revolution going on across the state right now, and for good reason. Every county this in this state is standing up and saying, "Enough is enough." When I traveled to Albany two weeks ago, I told our State Delegation that the weight of this burden had reached the breaking point. We're being forced to cut important services like health care, road repair, and even close parks, so that we can send more money to Albany instead.

Medicaid is a great program, no doubt about it, but it should not be funded by local taxpayers. It's not a program that was ever designed to be funded out of property taxes and sales taxes. It doesn't work, it can't work, and the consequences we're reaping right now. We need Medicaid reform and we need it now.

**(Applause)**

There are some things being discussed in Albany, however, that could be helpful in solving some of our financial problems. Capping the pension fund contribution at the amount that we budgeted, and allowing local governments to pay the additional amount over time would be a great help. And the Governor's made that proposal, but it can only be implemented by the State Comptroller, and that hasn't happened as yet. The Governor's budget plan would restore revenues from the sales tax on clothing purchases for local governments like Suffolk County without local action, but the Speaker of the Assembly is adamantly opposed. And given the bitter debate that is going on in Albany, it's not clear whether there will ever be an agreement on any of these issues. So, as far as the State is concerned, we should hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.

Right now, my Budget Office is projecting a two-year budget gap of between 124 million and 236 million dollars. The Legislature's Budget Review Office is still updating its forecast, but last Fall, BRO predicted a gap of as much as 140 million dollars. Now, regardless of which

projection is more accurate, the size of the budget gap is frightening.

Suffolk County has ended each of the past ten years with a budget surplus, and that's something that I'm very proud of. And the Legislature, all of you, should be proud of that as well, because it takes two branches of government to make Suffolk County work. But it seems clear that the days of budget surpluses may well be behind us, unless we act quickly and act decisively. Like every other county in this state, Suffolk County has a budget problem, and we need to get on with the hard work of fixing it. I don't pretend to have all of the answers, but I do know that there are no easy ones.

In the past, Wall Street rating agencies have pointed to cooperation between my office and the Legislature in the upgrading of the County's bond rating. It's one of the things that we've gotten some of the positive feedback that we've gotten from the bond rating agencies, and they'll be looking for that same cooperation now. Wall Street will be watching as we work to close the budget gap and work together. And we'll solve that problem, I'm sure, regardless of what it takes, because that's the responsibility that we have to the people of Suffolk County.

Several weeks ago, I called for the development of a Budget Deficit Action Plan to close the budget gap. And as you may know, I've had preliminary discussions about that with Presiding Officer Postal and Deputy Presiding Officer Caracappa. Those discussions were frank and productive, and I think we'll have a lot more to say about that issue in the weeks ahead.

Another situation that will require tough financial decisions involves our correctional facilities. Correctional programs are one of society's most complex and unfortunate mandates. I say "unfortunate", because the State Constitution makes it the County's responsibility to provide them. Correctional facilities are costly, and Suffolk County has outgrown its correctional facilities.

In recent years, the State has allowed Suffolk County to house 400 more prisoners than our facilities are designed to hold, but this permission has been granted with the expectation that the County would move ahead to develop new facilities. Well, the State has lost its patience. The Commission of Corrections has warned that it will not extend the authority if the County does not move quickly to meet its long-term needs.

Sheriff Tisch estimates that moving these inmates to other facilities would cost taxpayers an additional 22 million dollars a year. Our Capital Program does include a 280-bed replacement facility, and the State sees this as an acceptable beginning, but only a beginning. Without a firm commitment to provide more than a thousand new beds, the Commission warns that it will pull the County's variances, and we would face more than 20 million dollars a year in new spending to ship prisoners to other jails in other parts of our state. We can't afford that. It would be smarter and less costly over the long run to commit to a long-term plan.

Sheriff Tisch is recommending that we move forward with a two-phase project, by adding 850 beds to the smaller project that's already in the Capital Program. It's a tough decision. We can either commit to a long-term building program, requiring a large capital investment, or spend 22 million dollars a year to transport prisoners to other facilities, getting nothing back for our investment. We would ultimately have to meet our long-term needs anyway, but at an even higher cost. The smarter and the better way is to commit to a long-term plan, and I will be supporting the Sheriff's recommendation when I submit my Capital Program on April 15th.

One of the frustrating aspects of the crisis facing counties, as I've said before, is the fact that it's being driven by forces beyond our control. The slowing national economy and increases in mandated costs mean that we're turning over money to the State that we had in the past used to provide important services locally. We may not like it, and it's certainly not fair, but we have to adapt. That means we have to find different ways to provide services, ways that are smarter and more cost effective. And sometimes that means making an upfront investment that promises long-term benefits. There are a number of areas where those kinds of opportunities exist, and one of them involves the Department of Social Services.

After nine consecutive years of decline, the public assistance caseload increased last year due primarily to a slowing in the economy. Now, bear in mind, the number of welfare cases is still 70% lower than it was before the Binder Bill was enacted in 1993. But there are some areas where the level of need is of real concern, and one of those concerns is the number of people who are turning to the County for emergency housing.

In June 1999, the number of homeless families being served by the Department of Social Services was 229. By the end of last year, that number had risen to 560, and nearly twenty-four hundred people were in emergency housing. It's a huge problem, driven by the lack of affordable rentals in a soaring real estate market, and it's the downside of the fact that property

values in Suffolk County have increased by nearly 80% in four years. The Joint Task Force that I created with former Presiding Officer Tonna brought together the very best minds to study this issue, and their recommendations were extensive. This is one area where we can do things in a smarter and better way, if we are willing to make an investment.

Providing emergency housing is a mandate, and it's an expensive proposition. In appropriate settings, it involves not just housing itself, but case management and employment services, day-care and health care. But in the current economy, the County is forced to rely in part on motels to meet this need. And using motels is not an effective solution for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the families are not provided with the important services that they need to get back on their feet again. Child care, employment counseling, case management and housing assistance can't be provided at the motels. People are forced out of their home communities, making it more difficult for them to seek a job or to keep a job. For the communities where they're located, the motels present a host of different problems. But what really catches your attention is the expense associated with the use of motels and the issue of cost effectiveness. Let's consider just one example.

The motel in question provides shelter for 48 families at a cost of \$150 a night per family. That means the Department pays the motel more than \$7,000 a night, or \$216,000 a month. Now, if you do the math, you'll find that that means that we're paying \$4,500 a month per family. Now, it's true, that this is a mandated function, and a significant part of the cost is funded by other levels of government, but there has to be a better and a smarter way to deal with this issue. Well, there is a better way. It would require, however, an investment, but it would save taxpayers millions of dollars.

A key finding of the Homelessness Task Force was that the County should consider creating permanent facilities. Facilities closer to the population they serve would allow people who need emergency shelter to stay closer to the jobs and schools that they have. They would help reduce the impacts that so-called welfare motels are having on some communities, and do a more effective job of helping people achieve self-sufficiency by making sure that they get the support services that they need to become independent. And most importantly, establishing shelters would save money.

The Department estimates that a Tier Two Shelter could save as much as a million-and-a-half

dollars every year compared to the cost of a welfare motel, and those projected savings do not include the cost of transporting kids from welfare motels to schools in their home communities. The transportation alone cost us 3.5 million dollars last year. Clearly, getting people out of welfare motels is a smarter and better way to go.

In the Capital Program I'll be submitting next month, I'll call for the County to develop at least one Tier Two Shelter for families in need of emergency housing.

***(Applause)***

One result of a budget crisis is that government is forced to re-examine the way it provides services, because, like private industry, government must change to adapt to changing circumstances. And ideas that had been the subject of theoretical discussions, examined in the light of changing circumstances, sometimes take on new value and new importance. People in the academic world call these opportunities policy windows, and one opportunity that we should take a hard look at involves the management and operation of our park system.

Last month, the Park Commissioner announced plans to close several County parks this season and to curtail operation at several others. She was not happy about it. But the Commissioner made clear that the closures were not entirely the result of recent cuts in discretionary spending. The reason was that staffing levels are so low that she felt the safety of employees and park patrons could not be assured. It's a problem that's been building for years. We've been adding thousands of acres to the park system, and we really haven't come to grips with the need to manage it all.

Forty-two thousand acres. Suffolk County Parks is the largest landowner on Long Island. The Department has four times as much land to manage as it did 25 years ago and half the employees. I think you'll agree that those numbers just don't add up. We've expanded campgrounds, added dozens of new facilities, and purchased new historic sites. And we've made a major investment in our future drinking water supply by preserving thousands of acres in the Pine Barrens, but we haven't provided the resources to manage them. The problem manifests itself in a number of ways, and some of those have been in the news recently. Part of the reason is that park operations are part of the general portion of our discretionary budget.

To the Budget staff, the Department is an attractive place to hold down spending, because the operations are not grant-funded, and any dollars spent -- any dollar not spent, certainly, is a dollar saved. We can change that. Today, I'd like to propose two things. First, we need to work together over the next few weeks to make sure that all of our parks facilities are open and operational this summer. Suffolk County's parks are an important part of our tourism industry and one of the services that every County resident should have the ability to enjoy. So I pledge that I'll work with you to make sure that the Commissioner's safety concerns are addressed, so that she can abandon the closure plan in time for the upcoming season.

***(Applause)***

Second, I think we should take advantage of our financial situation, take advantage of it as an opportunity, an opportunity to look at smarter and better ways to fund the parks system. One of the things that makes the parks system unique is the fact that it generates significant revenues. In fact, between license fees, user fees and other revenues, the Department generates nearly 8 million dollars a year. If those revenues were dedicated to park operations, they would cover about 65% of the Department's costs. The rest of those costs are paid for out of the General Fund. If we created a self-contained enterprise fund or park district, several things would happen. First, revenues generated in the parks would stay in the parks system where they could be used to best advantage.

Second, the removal of parks operations from the General Fund would eliminate a 4 million dollar burden at a time when we need to take as much pressure as possible off the General Fund.

Third and most importantly, a self-contained park district could allow us to address the staffing and resource needs of the department. And that need is real.

We have thousands of acres of sensitive Pine Barrens watershed and no land management or natural resource staff. User groups who support the parks, like the Suffolk Committee for Camping, the Long Island Beach Buggy Association, and the Nature Conservancy will tell you that their staffing levels are far past being a problem. A park facility with a campground is a seven day a week, twenty-four-hour-a-day operation. Hundreds of families stay over each night. You can't operate a park like that safely with one full-time employee.

The best indication that a self-contained park fund would be smarter and better is the fact that it would solve these problems at a minimal cost to taxpayers. Treated as a separate line on the tax bill at current funding levels, our parks operation would cost the average taxpayer about \$7.20 a year. An annual charge of \$20 would allow us to increase staffing levels and open additional parkland areas for public use. We could modernize fee collection, create new equipment to tighten up operations, create a new swipe-card system, and even reduce some of the user fees. Now, I know that the committee we established last year is studying the issue now. Their report is expected by April. Once their work is completed, I'll ask for your support for a referendum on the creation of a self-contained funding mechanism for Suffolk County parks.

***(Applause)***

Let's allow the people of Suffolk County to decide whether doing more to protect our parks system while reducing the tax burden on the General Fund is a good idea.

We do face challenges, but our government is doing great things in many areas, as well. And we continue to make great progress in using technology to make government more efficient. We now have an online credit card system for use by applicants for the Police Officer exam. For the first time in history, the application process did not require the use of overtime. More than 70% of the applications have been E-filed, saving taxpayers \$75,000.

The County Clerk's innovative use of technology also reached new levels. Ed Romaine has done a magnificent job. As a result, people can access court records and land data from the comfort of their homes 24 hours a day. All told, the Clerk generated a record 312 million dollars in revenue last year. That's a new record. That's a terrific job.

***(Applause)***

That's a new record, by the way, and a 45% increase over 2001, with no increase in permanent staff. That's cost effective use of technology.

A new internet camping reservation system was activated in the parks, and we continued to expand use of the internet to get important health information to the public, like mosquito

spraying schedules, and the results of restaurant inspections.

Another impressive example of technology in action are the mobile data terminals that we've installed in police sector cars, using federal grant money. Police officers in the field can access computers in Albany and Washington to obtain information directly from their vehicles. They can look up warrants and orders of protection, and even view photos of suspects and training videos without tying up staff at headquarters. And soon, officers will be able to click on a map and then click on "school", and different locations in schools, to access building plans in a data base that we created after the tragedy at Columbine.

Even as we embrace a high-tech future, however, we are working hard to save important parts of Suffolk County's past, and last year, we achieved a landmark victory in historic preservation. Saving land and historic structures are both important priorities. When we're able to accomplish both, the benefits are obvious. There are very few places left in the nation that can boast the historical significance of Suffolk County's newest historic site.

In 1777, more than 300 British troops camped at Sagtikos Manor. In 1790, General George Washington really stayed there. Simply put, the Manor House and property are a site of national significance. So when we learned that the site might be sold for development, working together, we were able to make sure that that did not happen. Sagtikos Manor is the most significant historic site ever acquired by Suffolk County, and with the help of community volunteers, it will become a landmark attraction for the Bay Shore area, and, in fact, for all of Long Island. One hundred years from now, people will visit Sagtikos Manor and learn that the British had camped there three hundred years earlier. That's the type of legacy that we should all be proud to leave for future generations.

***(Applause)***

The preservation of Sagtikos Manor will be a lasting tribute to the foresight of County government, and the efforts of Legislator Angie Carpenter, who worked so hard on it. Great job, Angie.

***(Applause)***

But there's more to Suffolk County's history than buildings and artifacts. In some cases, we're working to preserve a culture. In fact, we're working to preserve a way of life.

More than 100 years before the British camped at Sagtikos, Williams Wells established a farm in what was then Southold, but is now part of Riverhead. His descendants led the movement that created the Town of Riverhead in 1792, and Daniel Wells became the new town's first Supervisor. Now, not many people can say that their family has been here since 1892, much less 1792, but the Wells Family has been here for 360 years, since the 1640's. Eleven generations later, the family is at the forefront of efforts to preserve the working farms that are such an important part of our history and of our economy.

With us today is the Chairman of Riverhead's Farmland Committee and Agricultural Advisory Committee. He serves on the Board of the Farm Credit Association, and his whole life is dedicated to agriculture in Suffolk County. Today, he is working the same soil his family has tilled since 1661. His name is Lyle Wells. He's a good friend. Lyle, would you stand up?

***(Applause)***

You know, I asked Lyle to be with us today, because his family's legacy underscores the historical importance of our efforts to save working farms.

I've spoken before about the importance of agriculture to our economy and our quality of life, and to tourism. People don't come to Suffolk County to see subdivisions or industrial parks, believe me. The rural character of the East End is the bedrock of our tourism industry. And keeping farms in production reduces the need for costly services, also, and it helps to hold down taxes. Over the past few years, the County and East End towns together have committed more funding to save working farms than ever before. But development pressure is more intense than it's ever been.

Acting on recommendations of the Farmland Select Committee, we've authorized the preservation of literally hundreds of farms, and a lot of staff time is spent contacting farmers who may or may not be interested in selling just yet. I know that the Legislature appreciates the importance of having a willing seller. Well, there may be a smarter and better way to approach farmland preservation. Sometimes you have to look back to move forward.

Suffolk's Farmland Preservation Program was the first in the nation. The Charter section that authorized the program includes a provision that allows the County to solicit offers from farmers, rather than making offers to them. It's what some have called a "Dutch Auction" approach. This provision hasn't been used for decades in Suffolk County, but it was in place for a reason. It could help speed preservation of working farms by helping to identify farmers who are interested in preservation right now. The farmers that the County would get responses from would all be willing sellers, and we would focus on the most competitive offers to get the best prices. Once an offer is made, an appraisal would be completed. And if the proposed acquisition is supported, it would be forwarded to the Legislature for approval.

Farmers and preservation advocates alike have expressed an interest in revising the "Dutch Auction" process. We need to do all that we can to accelerate our efforts to save working farms and, certainly, this would be one step in that direction. So I'll be submitting legislation to authorize the use of this provision, and I hope I can count on your support.

***(Applause)***

Now, I would be remiss if I didn't report on the County's state of emergency preparedness. The events of September 11th changed the way America looks at and will look at homeland security issues forever. Across the nation, governments on all level began focusing on emergency response and preparation efforts. Here in Suffolk County, we were years ahead of the curve. That's why our strategic planning is being heralded by high-ranking State official as a model for others to follow.

Our efforts began in 1999, with the establishment of our Terrorism Response Task Force. The competence and professionalism of our Police, Fire Rescue and Health Department staff, and the dedication of our volunteer firefighters and emergency medical responders made all of that possible.

The relationship between our government and volunteers was forged during the heroic response to the Sunrise Wildfires, and it was strengthened again when we worked closely to deal with the tragedy of TWA Flight 800. By the time the 9/11 attacks occurred, the Terrorism Task Force had already been at work for two years. That's why we were able to provide such significant help to New York City in the days and weeks following September 11th. And since those

events, the Task Force has been working closely with the Health Department, Public Works, and law enforcement agencies on all levels to take our planning efforts to an even higher level.

Creating a complete inventory of hundreds of vulnerable locations, like power plants, fuel storage and health care facilities, was an important step. In the event of an emergency, Task Force members now have aerial photographs, site plans, and even blueprints of those locations at their fingertips. Providing training and equipment for use by staff and volunteers is another important part of the overall planning effort.

State-of-the-art COBRA and E-Team computer software to coordinate response efforts has been made available to FRES, Police, and Emergency Services Units. And in the months to come, 16 storage units containing monitoring and decontamination equipment will be placed at strategic locations throughout the County. With all of these pieces in place, we're prepared to take the next step in the process that has kept Suffolk County in the forefront of emergency response planning.

This afternoon, I'll be issuing a directive making ours the first county in the state to implement an Incident Command System for all County departments and agencies. With an ICS in place, we'll develop a full Incident Management Team to better coordinate multiple site responses, like the one required for Flight 800. Our Fire Departments, Police, and EMS Units are all trained under this system. It's time to bring other County agencies into the ICS framework for emergency responses as well.

As I indicated earlier, the competence and professionalism of our Police and Fire Rescue staff save hundreds of lives each year. But it's the dedication of thousands of volunteers that makes our emergency response system work in Suffolk County. For those of us who find ourselves in need, their dedication can mean the difference between life and death. Here are some examples.

Through a driving rain, volunteer firefighter, working at a fishing station in Mount Sinai, sees a flash of red near the boat ramp and decides that something is not right. Along with a friend, the young firefighter gets to the boat ramp just in time to see a car sinking into the water. Inside are a young mother, who has lost her bearings, and her two-and-a-half year old daughter. Acting as a team, this young man and an even younger friend pried open the door of the car, pulled the woman to safety, and extracted the car seat with the child still strapped

inside. The older of the pair struggled to tread water while holding the carseat above his head, until his young friend grabbed the car seat and carried the child safely to shore. Well, this rescue took place in 2001.

These young heroes were both honored recently. Just last month, two of these young men received the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission Award. Young Chris Crociata has since joined the Coast Guard and is away at sea, but the volunteer firefighter recently returned from Washington, where he received one of the first Presidential Public Safety Medals of Valor ever awarded. His name is Eric Svihovec and he's a member of the Miller Place Fire Department. He is with us today, along with Emily Wardell and young Olivia. Would you all please stand?

**(Applause)**

You know, the story of these two young men and the mother and child that they saved is an inspiring one, and it's gotten a lot of attention, but there are hundreds of examples of dedicated service that we really never hear about, and here's another example. It occurred during the President's Day blizzard on February 17th, near the very tip of Long Island. A call came into the Springs Fire Department, just after 9 a.m., during the height of the storm. A seventy-one year old male was in cardiac arrest, with no heartbeat or vital signs. East Hampton Police responded, equipped with a defibrillator, but they received a "no shock" advisory. The police officers applied CPR instead. Then the ambulance from the Springs Fire Department arrived, through weather conditions that had shut down most of Long Island. The crew inserted a breathing tube, applied low voltage pacing, and administered cardiac medication. Still, there was no sign of a heartbeat. But the crew from Springs would not give up. They established contact with Medical Control at University Hospital in Stony Brook who began to direct the crew's actions. Driving in white-out conditions, they began the trip to Southampton Hospital. Still, there was no response, but the crew from Springs kept working on. After fifty-two minutes of effort, the patient did regain a pulse and normal heartbeat. The crew managed to get to Southampton and admitted the patient for treatment, despite nearly impassable conditions.

The persistence and the perseverance of the crew from Springs is an example of the dedication that we've come to expect from our volunteers. They put themselves at risk in any weather condition, under any circumstances to help others. So with us today is the crew's leader,

Advanced Emergency Medical Technician Pat Glennon of the Springs Fire Department. Pat, would you stand?

**(Applause)**

Our County has come a long way since the migration of the population eastward began following World War II, and the demographics of our communities have changed as well. We've all witnessed the expanding influence of a proud and growing Latino community, and the significant contributions that they're making. When this Legislature was created, it was seen as a fairer and more democratic form of government and a way to give the average citizen a great voice. The Legislature has lived up to that promise. In the months ahead, important decisions must be made about the size of the Legislature and about its configuration. Several proposals have been made, and strong arguments have been articulated for each of them. But the right approach is one that recognizes the growing importance of our Latino population and gives it a greater voice. And that's why I will support the proposal to create a 19th District to represent the Brentwood area, because it is a fairer, more democratic approach in a County with a proud history of representative government.

**(Applause)**

As I mentioned earlier, this will be the last time that I come before you to report on the state of the County. And while some of you may find it difficult to believe, I have mixed feelings about that. You know, a democratic government is in some ways like a tug of war, particularly here in Suffolk County. As I mentioned earlier, nobody does it better than we do, but it's not always easy. Neither branch of a government can take full credit for its successes or full responsibility for its problems. In the final analysis, I think we can all agree that we hope to leave Suffolk County a better place, and I think we'll be able to say that when we have.

When I appeared before the Legislature 11 years ago, our County faced a two-year budget deficit of 200 million dollars. We worked together, we made tough decisions, and we put our house in order. The Presiding Officer was a major component in solving those problems. As a result, Suffolk County has ended each of the past ten years with a budget surplus.

After inheriting a County with "junk bond" status, we've seen our bond rating upgraded three times in recent years. Wall Street has credited strong financial management and cooperation

between the Legislative and Executive Branches for that. We've cut County General Fund property taxes so far that they make -- that they now make up less than 2% of the average tax bill, 2%.

If we had promised ten years ago that County General Fund property taxes would be no higher in 2003 than they were in 1993, no one would have ever believed us. Well, the County collects 67% less in General Fund property taxes than it did ten years ago. No other level -- no other local government on Long Island can come anywhere close to making that kind of claim. And in retrospect, and this is something we should think about, in retrospect, we may have cut taxes too much for our own good, and that's an issue that we'll be wrestling with in the weeks to come.

Suffolk County is also a much safer place than it was in 1992. The murder rate last year was the lowest since the County began keeping records in 1964. Incidents of major crimes are 50% lower than they were, and the quality of life crimes that affect our neighborhoods are down by even greater amounts.

We've set standards for others to follow in areas like welfare reform, thanks to initiatives like finger imaging and our "Welfare to Work" initiatives. And while the durability of our efforts is being tested in the current economy, the welfare caseload is nearly 70% lower than it was in 1993.

Along with our partners in State and Town government, we've preserved the Pine Barrens to ensure that future generations will have pure drinking water. We've preserved more open space than at any other time in the County's history. We should be proud of that record also, and we must make sure that any issues that threaten to slow our efforts are dealt with squarely and quickly.

And we've achieved other goals that we set out to improve -- that set out to improve the quality of life, like our successful campaign to bring minor league baseball to Suffolk County.

Now, there are many successes that we can look back on with pride, but our most serious test is yet to come. The next nine-and-a-half months will be my last in office, and they may well be the most important months that I serve, because the steps that we take may determine

whether Suffolk County can adapt to changes being forced on us, or fall victim to an inability to confront them.

Pretending that current revenues are enough to both fund existing programs and send hundreds of millions more each year to the State would be like sticking our heads in the sand. We've got some very tough decisions to make. The solutions we identify in the weeks ahead may be seen as bitter medicine, and none of us has all of the answers, but I do know this: No solution is possible, unless the Executive and the Legislative Branches of our government work together.

When I addressed the Legislature 11 years ago, we faced a budget situation that to some seemed beyond our ability to solve. At the time, I said we may face great difficulties, but I firmly believe that no problem we face is insurmountable when we approach it in a spirit of cooperation rather than confrontation. Those words are as true and as pertinent today as they were then.

Suffolk County has a bright, bright future, but we have to navigate our way through the choppy seas ahead. I pledge to work with you through the very last day of my term in office to protect everything we've accomplished together over the past 11 years, for we have no greater obligation than to prepare our County for the harsh realities of the new economy. I look forward to rising with you to meet that challenge.

Thank you.

***(Applause)***

**P.O. POSTAL:**

Thank you, Mr. County Executive. The meeting is adjourned.

***[THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED AT 11:50 A.M.]***