

**Welfare to Work Commission
Of the Suffolk County Legislature**

Minutes of the April 9, 2010 Meeting

Present: Richard Koubek, Chair; Kathy Liguori, Vice Chair; Legislator Kate Browning; Bridget DePasquale; Ellen Krakow; Eric Lopez; Gwen Branch; Don Friedman; Judy Cahn; Roland Hampson; Vincent Cassidy for Pam Killoran; Peter Barnett; Michael Haynes; Mike Stoltz; Idania Aponte; Rob Greenberger

Excused: Nina Leonhardt; Joan Grant; Frank Casiglia; Jack Caffey; Jane Devine; Peggy Boyd

Guest: Michael White, Executive Director, LI Regional Planning Council; Dennis Nowak, SCDSS Child Protective Services

1. **Minutes:** The minutes of the February 19th meeting were accepted unanimously on a motion by Kathy Liguori, seconded by Don Friedman
2. **Presentation on Affordable Housing:** Chair Richard Koubek, noting that the Commission has a 2010 goal of revisiting the recommendations in its 2007 report to the Legislature on affordable housing, welcomed Michael White, Executive Director of the Long Island Regional Planning Commission (LIRPC,) who reviewed the recommendations and agreed to provide the Commission with an update on affordable housing and related issues in Suffolk County.
 - a. Mr. White began by stating that affordable housing is linked to the LIRPC's 2035 Regional Comprehensive Sustainability Plan which he planned to discuss as well. He began by observing that affordable housing is still a work in progress in Suffolk County. The interrelated housing and financial crises hit Long Island hard, with a significant lack of housing starts impacting the market over the past two years. Nevertheless, he pointed out several signs of housing progress:
 - i. The proposed AvalonBay at Huntington Station project would create over 500 units of town houses, with 25% of them affordable, most of these being rental units. This is also a Transit Oriented Development complex, located within walking distance of the LIRR.
 - ii. Patchogue continues its downtown revitalization which has affordable housing as an important component.
 - iii. "Wyandanch Rising" is a Town of Babylon project showing great promise in its creation of a plan to redevelop Wyandanch, Suffolk County's poorest community. The plan includes a long-delayed sewer hookup for Wyandanch. Funding issues remain a problem and have not been resolved.

- iv. Riverhead also is pursuing its downtown revitalization and the possible development of an Epcot-like center at the Grumman plant.
- b. The 2035 Regional Comprehensive Sustainability Plan has a number of components that will affect affordable housing on Long Island. The planning process which began a year ago around issues of transportation and land use, has provided an opportunity for both counties to work together and has involved town and village leaders, some of whom have been added to the membership of the LIRPC. The LIRPC has created a matrix to identify who will be responsible for each of the Plan's goals, and time frames for achieving these goals.
- c. The 2035 Plan will have three major topical components: (1) taxing and finance; (2) the economy; (3) environment and infrastructure; (4) social equity. Modeled after Mayor Michael Bloomberg's comprehensive PlaNYC, the plan will challenge Robert Moses' premise from the 1940s and 1950s that "the car is king" on Long Island. The plan will also address the unique governmental structure of LI which contains hundreds of governmental units including 13 towns, almost 100 villages, 125 school districts and many small districts such as fire, water, utility and other units of government.
- d. School taxes are a major focus of the Plan; 66% of property taxes on LI are school district taxes. LI has some of the nation's best school districts, but the system is "mixed" because it also has some very low-performing districts. School taxes, which have risen faster than inflation, are adding to the un-affordability of home ownership on LI and are a factor in the exodus of young workers from the Island. Teacher salaries and benefits are a major cause for rising school taxes.
 - i. The LIRPC has been in conversations with New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) union leaders on LI about what can be done to contain salaries and benefits. Mr. White believes that all LI teachers should be employed by New York State and that NYSUT should negotiate a single contract for all the State's teachers.
 - ii. School boards should support affordable housing, but they tend not to because they correlate affordable housing with low-income housing and with the need for more expensive special education programs which they believe will raise taxes.
 - iii. LI children in poor school districts should have greater choice in their educational options, including charter and parochial schools.
- e. Mr. White identified a number of strategies being employed by the LIRPC to address taxes, economic development and affordable housing:
 - i. Enacting a temporary property tax freeze, followed by a cap on property taxes.
 - ii. Streamlining the town and county approval process for new housing development to include a "one-stop" approval process and date certain time frames for approvals. Among the Plan's goals are

- improving the tax base and expanding housing options such as rental and multifamily units.
- iii. Fostering regional collective bargaining agreements for schools and the police.
 - iv. Adopting a regional approach to dealing with the poorest school districts, rather than marginalizing them as troubled schools which are dealt with as a problem distinct from the LI educational system.
 - v. Fostering the continued revitalization of mixed-use, mixed-income downtowns near public transportation links with a goal of generating jobs in these centers that will site the workers' housing near their place of work.
 - vi. Developing a toolkit for county and state "overlays" to foster the economic and housing development goals of the LIRPC. The LIRPC does not have zoning powers, but it can be an instrument to foster development.
 - vii. Establishing "infrastructure banks" to provide funding for the development of much-needed sewers, especially in Suffolk County.
- f. Mr. White profiled some of the 2035 equity goals including:
- i. Establishing a Fair Housing Action Plan that would site affordable housing in all parts of LI.
 - ii. Establishing a Task Force on Low-Wage Immigrant Workers which will contain programs that are culturally-sensitive to these ethnic groups, with special attention to youth programs.
 - iii. Creating training and educational programs for low-income people such as the recently-opened job center in Wyandanch.
- g. There ensued an extensive discussion of Mr. White's report.
- i. Richard Koubek asked if the merger of school districts is being given serious consideration. Michael Stoltz stated that he believed LI is depriving children of the best educational options by resisting school mergers. Mr. White replied that districts have begun to consolidate services (e.g., purchasing supplies) but that the actual mergers of school districts are not seen as a short-term goal. Mergers, he noted, would provide significant cost savings in administrative salaries, teacher salaries and benefits and could foster shared resources such as distance learning.
 - ii. Don Friedman pointed out the need for State action, for identifying State agencies that have regional responsibilities and the need for the LIRPC to work with similar councils in other parts of the State.
 - iii. Legislator Browning spoke of the need for sewers, for example, at Forge River in her legislative district. Mr. White agreed that sewers are essential and that he hoped an Infrastructure Bank would foster their development. Ellen Krakow asked if there are many development projects being held up by the lack of sewers. Mr. White responded that he does not have definitive numbers, but

he knows that the lack of sewers is a barrier to development in a number of places (such as Wyandanch.)

- iv. Legislator Browning also raised the idea of an income tax, rather than the current property tax, as a more equitable way of funding public schools. Mr. White responded that the LIRPC is looking at greater school choice for parents in underperforming districts.
 - v. Mr. Koubek asked if sober homes are an issue being addressed by the LIRPC. Mr. White responded that he is willing to look at this issue but that he thinks it is really a matter best suited to the Department of Health. Legislator Browning responded that the Department of Health has no enforcement powers over sober homes.
 - vi. Mr. Koubek thanked Mr. White for his thorough and challenging presentation, as did other members of the Commission.
3. **Sober Homes Committee:** Mr. Koubek announced that the research has been completed and he is prepared to begin drafting the report which will likely be presented to the Commission for approval in June. The Sober Homes Committee will be reviewing a draft outline in about a week and the draft report in early May.
 4. **Monthly Staffing Report:** Tabled.
 5. **EFSP Cut:** Mr. Koubek announced that the State has restored \$573,000 (63%) of the \$1 million Suffolk EFSP funds cut by the federal government. This brings the Suffolk funding close to the 2008 level; the 2009 level of \$1 million was unusually high due to the effects of the recession. Dennis Nowak, who co-chairs the local EFSP Board, thanked the Commission for its support. He noted that the national EFSP Board must still work to change the formula that caused the Suffolk cut.
 6. **SCDSS Liaison Committee:** Chair Peter Barnett reported that the Committee had a very productive first meeting on March 31st and that a second meeting is scheduled, at the SCDSS Mary Gordon Administration Building, for May 5th.
 7. **Parish Outreach Programs:** Bridget DePasquale reported that only 13 of approximately 100 parish outreach coordinators – 9 in Suffolk County – have accepted the Diocese’s Voluntary Separation Program (early retirement incentive) and that she, and her colleagues at Catholic Charities do not anticipate major problems in the ability of the outreach centers to continue serving the poor. Some of the retiring coordinators may be replaced by volunteers and some outreach centers may be merged, but there are no definitive decisions yet.
 8. **Employment Assessment Committee:** Chair Rob Greenberger reported that the draft *Did You Know?* disabilities flyer seems to have been well received by SCDSS administrators and that discussions are underway to improve ADA policies and procedures. A next meeting date has not yet been set.
 9. **Child Care Committee:** Chair Kathy Liguori reported that 3800 children are being serviced but that the County has not yet received its second-half 2010 State budget allocation. She noted that waiting lists have been reduced but that the Title XX families – working poor families earning about 275% of the Federal poverty level – are not being served at all by subsidized-child care because of federal funding cuts.
 10. **Minority Disproportionality in FCS:** Dennis Nowak, an administrator in the SCDSS Child Protective Services Division, thanked the Commission for adding his

report to the agenda. Mr. Nowak distributed a report, compiled from State and County data, titled, *Disproportionate Minority Representation (DMR) in Child Welfare*. Mr. Nowak stated that the disproportionate number of minority children in DSS child welfare programs is a State and national problem. In Suffolk County, for example, African American children represent 9.2% of the population but comprise 46.7% of the children in foster care. Suffolk's rate of 10.1 black children in care for every white child places the County in what the State defines as a category of "extreme disparity" along with 18 other counties. He identified a number of factors as possible causes of disproportionality including: the impact of poverty; family distrust of child welfare and cultural misunderstanding within the system; racial bias among CPS reporters; differences in parenting practices; and institutional racism – the combination of policies, practices or procedures embedded in bureaucratic structures that have systematically led to unequal outcomes for minorities. He noted that African American families are more likely to live in poverty and more likely than white families to come in contact with social-welfare providers who are the primary sources of child-protective reports. Some well meaning federal and State laws requiring quick action and resolution in child-welfare situations might also have the unintended consequence of disproportionately impacting families of color who have poorer access to services needed to avoid the child welfare system. As a possible solution, Mr. Nowak noted that SCDSS is pilot testing a State *Family Assessment Response* project, scheduled to begin in June, 2010, that will work to enhance community-based child welfare programs provided by non-governmental agencies. The goal of the pilot is to make these programs more accessible to poor children living in minority communities. SCDSS is also closely monitoring the data on disproportionality and is developing programs such as parenting classes to address underlying problems before they become child welfare cases. Mr. Koubek thanked Mr. Nowak for this report and commended the Department for the frank and thorough assessment and response it is providing for this complex problem.

11. **Next Meeting: Friday, May 14 , 9:30 AM** in Conference Room A of the SCDOL One Stop Center. [Note: this meeting was moved to May 21st.]