

WILLMOTTS & WHY NOTS

DAVID J. WILLMOTT SR., EDITOR

Err on the Side of Safety

During the Shoreham Nuclear Power Plant fight, *Suffolk Life* decided it would prefer to err on the side of safety. We take the same position regarding the reactor that has been closed at the Brookhaven National Lab for the past two and a half years.

The reactor was closed after the fuel pool was found to be leaking radioactive wastewater into the aquifer. When it was closed for inspection and repair, most people believed the United States Department of Energy would allow it to reopen at a future date.

Two weeks ago, U.S. Energy Secretary Bill Richardson announced the reactor would be permanently closed. About 100 people who operated the reactor would be offered positions at other facilities. The experiments that were being conducted at Brookhaven National Lab are being transferred

to two other sites in the country.

The reactor and the research done at Brookhaven Lab were a source of pride for Long Islanders. The lab employs over 5,000 people in total, and is a major economic contributor to the area.

The lab has been cloaked in secrecy because it operated under the auspices of the Department of Energy. When residents raised questions about lab operations, answers were not forthcoming. When people are stonewalled, they become suspicious. About five years ago, contaminated water was found south of Brookhaven. Officials blamed the source of contamination on facilities outside of the lab's perimeters, but many residents did not believe those officials.

Just before the radioactive leak was discovered, the lab wanted to pump wastewater directly into the Peconic River. It tried to steamroll this project without going through the normal environmental investigations. The project was stopped but not before it raised more red flags.

Lab director John Marburger was brought in to reorganize the lab and reinforce its commitment to safety. Marburger had been the president of Stony Brook University. He was also the chairman of the Shoreham-Cuomo Commission. He had experience with nuclear power in the Navy and knew the industry's advantages and disadvantages. Marburger was said to be appalled

at the lack of urgency among lab employees on safety issues.

Since the radioactive leak was announced, the lab has made attempts to open the lines of communication with the community. But the trust that the community once had for the lab is now lost. It has continued its opposition to restarting the reactor, and politics being what they are, the reactor is now permanently closed.

We mourn the loss of the valuable research that had been conducted, and we sympathize with the families who will be relocated from Long Island and will have to start their lives anew.

But we also utter a sigh of relief for our safety.

And why not?

Repeal the Salary Increases

According to Legislator Cameron Alden, County Executive Robert Gaffney, utilizing a certificate of necessity earlier this month, presented the Suffolk County Legislature with a bill for passage. Legislators had no time to read the measure, debate its merits, nor hold a public hearing for taxpayer input. This bill increases elected officials' salaries by 30 to 34%. Although the legislators did not have time to consider the ramifications of the bill, they passed it 13 to 4. Alden and three other courageous legislators voted "No."

Alden will introduce a new resolution at the next board meeting calling for a rollback of the raises. In addition, he will ask that the question be placed on the ballot in next November's election. The resolution will ask for the repeal of the 30 to 34% salary increase and limit any further increases to the rate of inflation or 4%, whichever is less. Alden's resolution will probably start a firestorm. It will be interesting to see which legislators will favor this measure.

Under the current system, legislators and other elected officials receive an automatic longevity increase each year that is tied to the rate of inflation but can be no higher than 4%. This has given everyone an automatic increase every year. For some, this is not enough. Their greed got in the way of good common sense. In pushing through the 30 to 34% increases, the legislature forgot that the average person who pays

taxes in Suffolk County has, at best, received wage increases that are around the rate of inflation. The exceptions to this are those people who move up in their skill level and are granted a raise based on value and productivity.

When candidates seek office they know what the salary is. They know they will receive an inflationary increase. They are expected to go to the job with experience and talent. Automatic inflationary raises should be enough to satisfy them.

Alden's amendment to the County Charter will make it unlawful for elected politicians to raid the treasury. Without this cap, the elected officials can raise their salaries every year, at will.

We congratulate Alden for having the courage to do what is right. We encourage you, the voters, to contact your own county legislators and tell them you want the raises rescinded. If Alden is unable to get the measure passed in the legislature, we the people, the voters and taxpayers of Suffolk County, will take the matter into our own hands. We will circulate petitions putting this measure on the ballot whether the legislature likes it or not.

More than 400 people have already agreed to circulate petitions. If you would like to be a volunteer, please fill out the attached coupon and mail it to Repeal the Raises, c/o P.O. Box 9167, Riverhead, NY 11901.

And why not?



Roll Back The Raises: Yes, I volunteer to help with the petition drive to roll back the raises and make all future raises subject to voter approval.

Name _____

Street Address _____

Town _____ Zip _____

Telephone Number _____

Please clip and mail to: Roll Back the Raises, c/o P.O. Box 9167, Riverhead, NY 11901

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Look Beyond the Cost of Bricks and Mortar

Several Suffolk school districts are in the process of presenting huge school building construction bond issues to the voters. Under current formulas, the state is willing to pick up the lion's share of that construction cost.

The school districts are asking the voters to pick up the cost of about 10% of the bonds. This will add \$50 to \$200 to the average real estate tax bill, depending upon the school district.

While this may be true, some of the numbers being given out by school superintendents do not include the cost of interest, which can double the taxpayer's contributions.

Even when the interest is added into the total construction cost it still may be reasonable. But the cost of construction and the tax burden to fund it is only a small portion of the final price.

The major portion of any school budget is the salaries for personnel: costs that normally make up 60% to 75% of the budget. When you add new classrooms, you must add more staff, which is directly funded through real

estate taxes.

Considering the average salary of teachers is more than \$60,000 and many with seniority earn close to \$100,000 and receive benefits worth 20% to 25% of their salary, the cost of staffing the schools is way out of proportion to the cost of building them.

Before taxpayers vote on new construction, they should have the information concerning not only the cost of building the schools, but also the cost of staffing them and what the total impact will be on their real estate tax bill.

Our educators teach us about paying attention to history and we only have to look back to the last great expansion in our educational facilities. The economy was booming and the school boards went about proposing record-breaking school building expansions. Some of the numbers submitted by the boards were based on inflated population growth expectations.

We built the schools and we staffed them with teachers who earned \$30,000 to \$40,000 per year at that

time. The economy crashed, but the cost of education continued to climb. The baby boom ended and schools had to be closed. The cost of operating them continued to accelerate and homeowners saw the school portion of their real estate tax bill go up to 60%. Taxes went from an average of \$1,000 per year on a home to between \$4,000 and \$6,000.

Mothers were forced out of the home and into the job market because the family needed the second income. There was no other way to survive. This led to an increase in juvenile delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse and parents at their wits' end.

Let us learn from our mistakes. Get all the facts and vote intelligently.

And why not?



Let the Competition Begin

The deregulation of the cable industry promised competition, which normally brings about a reduction in rates. But the opposite has happened with Cablevision.

Each year, its rates have gone up, sometimes modestly and sometimes outlandishly. Cablevision claimed it had to adjust its rates to compensate because of an increase in programming costs.

The only alternative to Cablevision is owning a satellite dish. Originally, they were big nine-foot monsters many considered obtrusive, and costing \$3,000 to \$4,000, which is out of reach for most homeowners. Satellite dishes offered unrestricted programming, not only from the United States but from around the world.

At the cable industry's insistence, satellite operators had to scramble their signals. Dish owners had to subscribe to unscrambling services or buy illegal unscrambling devices.

A few years ago, compact dishes were put on the market at a cost of anywhere from \$100 to \$400 each. They were easily installed by homeowners or they could be installed by service technicians for about \$100, and you had to subscribe to programming services. Packages run from \$25 to \$75 per month, depend-

ing upon the programming you desired.

The cable industry had encouraged regulations that forbid the satellite providers from including local news broadcasting. Last week, however, Congress passed legislation, and the president signed it into law, not only allowing, but requiring, satellite providers to include local network news. Satellite dish owners will now be able to receive New York affiliates of ABC, CBS, NBC, as well as WPIX.

That puts Cablevision in a position of now having meaningful competition, which gives the people a real choice. Cablevision can put into place any kind of rate increase it wants. If the subscriber feels it is too high or unjustified, they can say, "Bye, bye, Cablevision. Hello satellite dish."

We believe many residents will try to get out from under the anti-competitive stranglehold of Cablevision. That company will not only lose subscribers, but it will lose advertising revenue on its Channel 12 station, since it will not be offered by satellite dish companies.

It is up to Cablevision to be fair to the consumer or suffer the consequences.

And why not?

The Powell Verdict

We were shocked Thursday night when we heard that a jury found John Powell guilty of extortion. We had followed the trial daily and it appeared the government had presented an extremely weak case. The federal prosecutors had two witnesses, both with poor reputations and both in trouble with the government.

The two expected to have their penalties reduced because they cooperated with the government. Both men wore wires for the government in an attempt to entrap Powell, but failed. Although Powell had been under surveillance for a number of months, he was never seen taking a bribe or asking for one.

When Powell was first indicted, we were stunned. We had been in conversation with Powell six months prior to his indictment. Powell had said he heard there was trouble at the dump, that bribes were being taken. He had gone to Brookhaven Town Supervisor Felix Grucci and advised him about this information. He allegedly told Grucci to investigate the matter and to clean up the mess.

Thirty days went by and nothing changed. Powell told us he had gone to District Attorney Jim Catterson, Jr., with the information and allegedly asked for

an investigation. This does not sound like a man who would be on the take. Why would he lead the government to the source if he was part of the operation? It just did not make sense, and for that reason, we could not conceive of Powell being guilty.

Juries do strange things. They react different ways to different stimuli. Powell was guilty of being egotistical and arrogant; but this is not a crime, it is a human weakness. We have heard him refer to Suffolk as "my county" and to Brookhaven as "my town" many times. Politically speaking, he was absolutely correct. He was the political boss, the chairman of the Republican Party and the Republicans rule Suffolk and Brookhaven Town. Powell probably did refer to the dump as "my dump," meaning he was the protector of it.

Although the jury has found him guilty, we still cannot find it in our heart to agree with them. John is too honorable, honest and ethical to have sold his soul.

We feel particularly sorry for his family. They have had to endure so much and they were proud of John's accomplishments. Hopefully, some day, the truth will come out and John will be exonerated.

And why not?

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There, But For The Grace of God, Go I...

None of us ever knows when things will change. Life is like a pendulum. One day you can be riding high, everything going your way. You have health, wealth and happiness. Suddenly, an unfortunate tragedy happens. You lose your job or your business. Your spouse suddenly passes away. You are in an accident or suffer illness. It does not make any difference what the circumstances are; you are rendered incapacitated.

We all know of people to whom this has happened. Maybe we have been there ourselves. When you have children, it is all that much more troublesome. To add to your dilemma, you are faced with having to tell your children you cannot provide for them as you have in the past. This is particularly upsetting at Christmas time. As much as children try to understand, they cannot conceive of Santa not coming. Yet, you find yourself with the unpleasant task of explaining he cannot come this year.

We are "The Group." Some of us have been in this predicament and know first hand the hurt and the sorrow on the little ones' faces. Each year, for the last 20, we have dedicated ourselves to changing this scenario. No, we cannot fix the problem that has brought about the grief. We can, however, make sure the little ones have a complete and fulfilling Christmas.

When we learn about families in need, we verify their legitimacy and ascertain what their clothing needs are and, when necessary, provide everything from underwear to outerwear. We try to get each child at least one gift they really want. We fill in with a host of other toys, games, dolls and books that are appropriate for their ages.

Each child is individually shopped for. The shoppers are all volunteers. They comb the malls and the outlets looking for the best values. They are expected to make every dollar that has been budgeted do double duty.

A few days before Christmas, as many as 100 volunteers box, wrap and tag each gift. The children are identified by their first names. The families are identified only by a code. Anonymity is our key word.

A day or two before Christmas, the gifts are delivered to the homes of the recipients. We try to make sure the children are not home. We want the parents to give the gifts to their children either from them or from Santa Claus. We want the kids to believe their parents somehow came through.

"The Group" is an informal gathering of Suffolk residents. We have no formal structure. It is pure giving. The recipients do not know who we are and, outside of a few people, no one ever knows the recipients' identities.

Not one cent of the money raised

is spent on administrative costs. No one gets credit for this grand endeavor. When "The Group" was originally formed, its founders decided not to acknowledge donations as this would add to the cost. We depend upon the goodness of Suffolk residents to make contributions to fund this endeavor. Our reward is the knowledge that we have reached out and made some precious child's Christmas come true. We do it when we can because, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

If you would like to help, we welcome your contributions. You can send your donations to The Group, c/o P.O. Box 9167, Riverhead, NY, 11901.

There are so many children, so much need and so little time left, so please be generous for their sakes.

And why not?

A Goodwill Gesture, But ...

We congratulate the management of the Plum Island Laboratory for inviting the media and local officials on a tour of the island. This was a long overdue public relations gesture.

Word leaked out that the laboratory was considering converting the facility into a 4, Biological Safety Level (BSL-4) laboratory.

The lab is currently a BSL-3 facility. Its mission is to do research connected with hoof and mouth disease and anthrax. A Level 4 facility would do research on more contagious and more infectious animal diseases, such as the Nipah swine virus that killed more than 250 people in Malaysia and millions of swine before it was brought under control.

Participants in the tour left the facility impressed with the safeguards taken to protect the employees. They were told about the precautions the employees take to avoid any escape of the diseases. Many, however, were left with questions as to whether the facility could ever be guaranteed to be failsafe. We must consider human and mechanical failures.

Acts of terrorism are defined as deliberate, deadly acts of destruction perpetrated by fringe, fanatical groups. If the laboratory exploded, residents from Boston to Philadelphia could be contaminated. Ninety million people could be exposed to danger depending upon the direction and speed of the wind. The lab is vulnerable both from the air and sea. Its

location is known world-wide. Its mission is in the public domain.

Is Plum Island the proper location for such a highly experimental governmental operation?

Supporters of Plum Island claim the lab could be upgraded to a BSL-4 facility for \$75 million, compared to spending \$140 million on the construction of a new facility. The \$65 million the government would save is petty cash in the context of the federal budget.

Isn't it worth an additional \$65 million to move the facility out of the center of such a huge population base? What would be the economic loss to the region if the land, water and air from Boston to Philadelphia were contaminated? What would be the impact if the millions of people in the area were stricken with disease and the land and buildings rendered useless? The death toll could be in the millions, the economic loss in the trillions.

Remember, it was the federal government that told us there never had been an accident at a nuclear power facility and there never would be! Then there was Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and a number of near misses.

Shouldn't the lab be in a remote part of our country where there is a limited population and land is of little value? It was a mistake to build the lab on Plum Island in the first place. We must not perpetuate that blunder.

And why not?

Our Christmas Wish for You

On December 25, Christians mark the nineteen hundred and ninety-ninth commemoration of Jesus' birth. This is the day God sent us his only son through the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary.

As we gather with family and friends to celebrate Christmas, let us all enjoy the trees, the lights, the wreaths, the gift giving and the faces of little children, but, let us not forget that today we celebrate the Mass of Christ and his birth.

This incredible gift of our Lord has been given to us by God. Jesus Christ was born for the redemption of our souls. By his life and his death, he obtained for us the opening of the gates of heaven. His teachings on earth gave us a path to follow for joining him in heaven.

Merry Christmas. May it find all men of all nations with peace in their hearts and wishes of good will for their family, friends and neighbors.

And why not?

Who is Your Person of the Year?

Suffolk Life Newspapers is seeking your nominations for the 1999 People of the Year.

During the past year, did someone go out of their way to help you or did they touch your life in some special way? It may be an EMT who saved yours or some loved one's life. It may be a fire person who risked their own life to save yours. It could be a boss who aided an employee through a very difficult situation. Maybe it was a teacher who helped a child come out of his shell and realize his potential.

Suffolk County is filled with unsung heroes. They are everyday people who go out of their way to reach out to others at work or in the

community. These people are rarely recognized, yet they contribute so much to what makes Suffolk great.

Once again this year, *Suffolk Life* wants to honor these citizens. We are seeking nominations from all Suffolk residents. We will select one winner from each town in each of the categories. The story found elsewhere in this paper contains a nomination form.

This program gives you an opportunity to thank that very special person who touched you. The names of all nominees will be published and the winners will be announced at the end of February.

Please nominate someone. And why not?

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Thank you, Thank you, Thank you!

The Group wants to thank all of you who contributed so generously to its efforts to provide a happy Christmas for children whose parents normally were able to provide for their families, but could not do so this year.

This year The Group's efforts were the largest ever. We were into triple digits in our coding system. Children received all their clothing needs from underwear to outerwear. When they return to school, they will be dressed in the latest fashions and will be able to hold their heads high.

Christmas morning, they opened their gifts from Santa or from Mom and Dad that contained everything they wanted. They sat down to a dinner that can truly be called a feast. The children were taken care of in every way.

We hope next year their parents will be back on their feet and be able to return to providing for their children themselves.

We would especially like to thank the volunteers who performed all the

administrative functions. They shopped until they dropped, finding that special present for those children whose images they created in their minds. All the shoppers knew were the children's first names, their ages and their sizes. Almost 100 people volunteered their time to shop, box, wrap and deliver all the presents. The presents were delivered to the recipients' homes a day or two before Christmas.

The Group is composed of average people from throughout Suffolk County. The recipients do not know who we are. Everything is done anonymously. The recipients never have to say thank you or feel embarrassed.

The Group does not spend one cent on administration. None of this effort could take place if it were not for the very generous financial contributions made by Suffolk residents.

We thank everyone who contributed time and finances to this effort. In keeping with our promise of

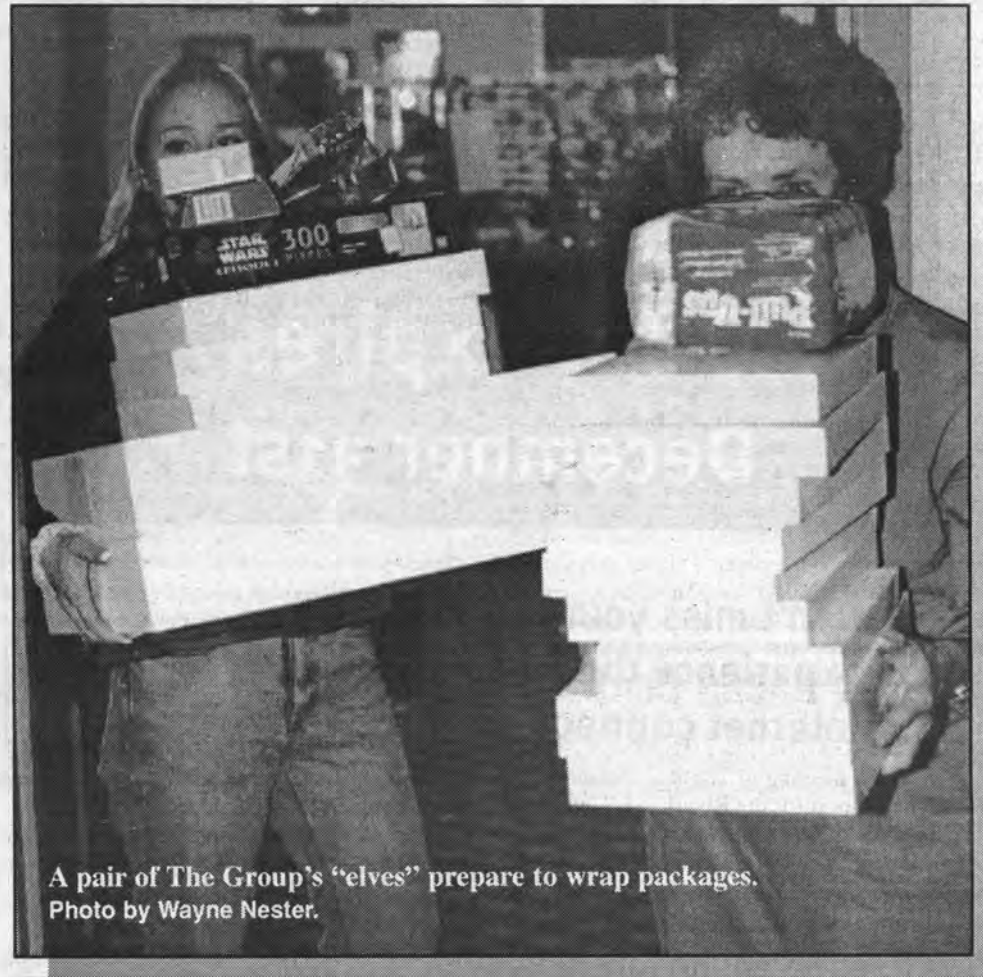
anonymity, we do not publish a list of those who have contributed. To keep with our pledge to spend every cent raised on the children, we do not send out personal acknowledgments but we do want everyone to know that we do

appreciate your generosity and want you to know what a difference you made in some child's life.

Have a happy New Year.

Love,

The Group



A pair of The Group's "elves" prepare to wrap packages.
Photo by Wayne Nester.

When Is Enough, Enough?

Has Suffolk County's new ballpark become a bottomless money pit?

Charles Bartha, commissioner of the Suffolk County Department of Public Works (DPW), appeared before the Suffolk County Legislature to request another \$1 million to complete the ballpark. Last Tuesday he got it. Merry Christmas from the taxpayers

When the proposal for a ballpark was first made, it appeared that the facility could be built for \$14 million. State Senator Owen Johnson obtained a grant from New York state for this amount of money. The state originally was also going to give the county land on which to build the stadium. This did not come to pass.

The county purchased land near the Cohalan Court Complex in Islip for \$2 million, leaving only \$12 million to build the stadium. When the bids came in, they were substantially higher than the allocated money. According to Bartha, the County Department of Public Works value engineered the project and reduced some of the cost overruns, but this still left them short \$4.5 million.

The county legislature was told that if it approved this \$4.5 million, the DPW would not have to come back for more. Less than a year has gone by and, once again, Bartha is back. He is looking for an additional \$1 million for paver stones and landscaping and is asking that \$500,000 be set aside for contingencies.

To Bartha's credit, the stadium is

being built for about half what other stadiums cost. The stadium will be the home of the Long Island Ducks, a semi-pro baseball team. The deal the county has cut with the owner of the Ducks will, we hope, cover the county's cost to maintain the stadium. If the team is widely successful, the arrangement would give the county a small margin of profit.

When the idea of a stadium was first proposed, Suffolk Life opposed it. We did not believe taxpayers' money should be used to build a facility for a private, profit-making endeavor. When the state coughed up the lion's share of the money, we still questioned if there would not be a day when the county taxpayers would be asked to contribute.

The county now has a "Catch-22" situation on its hands. Does it dig into the taxpayers' pockets to complete the project, or does it say "no" and leave the structure aesthetically unappealing?

Bartha claimed that if he did not receive the money for the contingencies, the county will be sued by vendors and end up spending taxpayers' money on attorneys. When Bartha was asked if this would be the last time he would have to come before the legislature seeking money, he could not definitively say "yes." He left the question open. This should make every legislator uncomfortable.

And why not?

Time to Renew

The United States Post Office requires all recipients of Suffolk Life Newspapers to indicate once a year that they want Suffolk Life mailed to their homes. If the majority of our readers honor this request we are eligible to mail Suffolk Life at a lower postal rate.

In January of each year, we run a subscription drive to fulfill this postal requirement. We ask every recipient to fill out either the detached card found with this week's paper or the coupon on the front page of this edition and mail it back to us.

To encourage you to act promptly, we will hold three contests for a week-end for two at Roseland Ranch. It is a great getaway and less than a three-hour drive from Long Island. A drawing for the trips will be held each week for three consecutive weeks. The earlier your renewal is received, the better your opportunity of winning.

On the fourth week of the subscription drive, we will hold a drawing for the Grand Prize of \$2,000 in silver dollars

in commemoration of the millennium.

There is no cost to enter these contests or renew your subscription; you pay nothing. Just sign your name and send in the card or the coupon. We do ask recipients to voluntarily pay for their renewal. We suggest a subscription renewal fee of \$15 or whatever you can afford. This renewal fee helps offset the cost of having Suffolk Life delivered to your home each week. It costs us almost 20 cents per copy per week just for postage and trucking.

Suffolk Life spends nearly \$2 million each year on the news portion of the paper. Because we make this investment, you are able to read about your county, your town or your village. You see photographs of your friends and your neighbors. We act as your watch dog in our editorial column and the letters to the editor page is your voice in the community.

Please renew your subscription today. Thank you for your support.

And why not?