Plastic Problem ‘Last Straw’ For Suffolk County

2019 marked the last straw for Suffolk County legislators when it comes to plastic and Styrofoam pollution. Lawmakers in April passed several environmental policies, including bans and limitations on plastic straws, polystyrene foam food service products, and loose fill packaging. The proposals were sponsored by Kara Hahn to codify recommendations of her Single-Use Plastic Reduction Task Force.

Under the new regulations, straws and stirrers provided by restaurants must be biodegradable or backyard compostable and may not be wrapped in plastic. Additionally, straws may be given to customers only if requested.

Drive-thru establishments may provide straws automatically, however the straws must be biodegradable. Pre-packaged drinks that include a straw (like juice boxes) are exempt.

A consumer with a disability or medical condition may be given a plastic or other non-biodegradable straw or stirrer if the consumer requests.

Violators of the law will be subject to a $100 fine for the first violation, $200 for the second violation, and $400 for any subsequent violations.

The new regulations also prohibit eateries from offering cups, containers, trays, and other disposable items that are made of polystyrene foam, better known as Styrofoam. Retail stores are prohibited from selling these products and polystyrene foam-based packing materials, like packing peanuts, to consumers.

The polystyrene ban exempts items used to store uncooked eggs, raw meat, pork, fish, seafood, and poultry.

A violation of this law would be punishable by a fine ranging from $500 for the first offense up to $2,500 for the third offense.

“The scale of the worldwide single-use plastics problem has become an ever-increasing threat to our environment and everything that relies on it, including human health... We as a County have taken action to address the challenges posed by these dangerous pollutants. It is my hope that our action will spur other leaders to take a bold stand against expediency in favor of sustainability.”

- Kara Hahn

Legislator Kara Hahn, holding plastic straws, emphasizes the threat of the plastic problem to the environment and human health.
Women Veterans Advisory Board Established

Female veterans, your voices will soon be heard louder and clearer than ever before. Legislators in 2019 approved a resolution to create a “Women Veterans Advisory Board.”

The advisory board is made up of 11 members, all female veterans, who discuss issues important to the women veterans’ community, make recommendations on legislation that could be proposed, and submit an annual report to the Legislature.

Suffolk County is home to the largest veterans population in the state. Women made up about 6 percent of the 66,687 veterans in Suffolk in 2016, according to a recent Newsday article. The sponsor of the legislation to create the advisory board, Legislator Susan A. Berland, said many organizations for veterans are dominated by males, and this new board will provide female veterans with a platform to advocate in the best interests of their demographic.

Legislator Susan A. Berland, center, who sponsored the resolution to establish an advisory board made up of women veterans, with Christine Glynn, StacyAnn Castro Tapler, Magdolna Resker and Cathie Norton Doherty, who advocated for the board.

Veterans Preference For County Housing

Legislators in 2019 established a veterans preference when it comes to renting out residences in county-owned parks.

Suffolk County rents and leases some residences in county parks to qualified individuals. Although any resident can apply for the housing, previously preference was given to current and former county employees. The local law passed in 2019, sponsored by Legislator Samuel Gonzalez, adds county residents who are veterans of the United States Armed Forces to the priority list. The veterans preference would be placed sixth on the priority list, moving general county residents down one spot to seventh.

Suffolk Now A Purple Heart County

Legislators in 2019 voted to designate Suffolk County as a “Purple Heart County.”

The Purple Heart is the oldest military decoration. It is awarded to members of the United States Armed Forces who have been wounded or killed in combat with a declared enemy of the United States.

The bill’s sponsor, Rob Calarco, wanted to designate Suffolk as a “Purple Heart County” to honor and commemorate those who have sacrificed so much to protect this nation.
Officials Green Light School Bus Camera Program

The roads will be safer for schoolchildren after legislators in 2019 approved a school bus camera program that will fine drivers who illegally pass a bus with its stop-arm extended.

New York State has authorized counties to opt into a school bus photo violation monitoring program that will allow the county to install cameras on buses in participating school districts. Fines will be issued to the registered owner of vehicles that fail to stop behind or in front of a school bus while the school bus stop-arms are extended.

State law prohibits drivers from passing a stationary school bus with its stop-arm extended. The law applies to drivers traveling in both directions, even across a divided highway. However, in New York State, nearly 50,000 drivers illegally pass a stopped school bus daily. Longwood Central School District reports an average of 100 each day.

The fines are $250 for the first violation, $275 for a second violation within 18 months, and $300 for the third and any subsequent violations within 18 months.

“The ultimate goal of this legislation is about the safety of our children,” said Legislator Rudy Sunderman, who sponsored the legislation to opt Suffolk into the program. “If we focus on protecting the children and their safety, this program will be a success.”

“Too many motorists ignore stopped buses with flashing lights and speed around them, putting students at risk,” said DuWayne Gregory, a co-sponsor along with Legislator Tom Muratore. “A program that institutes fines will provide the impetus to obey the law.”

Fair Housing Task Force Formed to Address Discrimination

Legislators are taking aim at housing discrimination with a new task force designed to address documented instances of steering based on race.

While the Suffolk County Human Rights Law proscribes certain activities relating to housing discrimination, evidence of steering consumers on the basis of race has come to light in spite of those laws, as reported in a recent three-year investigation by Newsday.

The Fair Housing Task Force will work to review the existing County Human Rights Law and provide recommendations to improve and strengthen these regulations to deter real estate practices that discriminate against individuals looking for homes in Suffolk County. The task force will be made up of 11 members: the Presiding Officer or his designee; the Minority Leader or his designee; the Executive Director of the Suffolk County Human Rights Commission; a representative of the NAACP; a representative of Latino Justice; a representative of Erase Racism; a representative of LIBOR; a representative of the New York State Division of Human Rights; and two fair housing advocates.

DuWayne Gregory, who was joined by Rob Calarco and Legislator Samuel Gonzalez in introducing the legislation, said the racial divides created by a real estate market that limits access to some communities based on race is unacceptable.

“The law within Suffolk County prohibits discrimination in housing among other things but the law clearly needs to be revisited to improve and strengthen the regulations to make them more effective. Diversity is not something to be feared. It should be encouraged and embraced and practices that discriminate against anyone must not be allowed to continue,” he said.
Pharmacies In Suffolk Go Tobacco Free

Tobacco products are no longer being sold at pharmacies in Suffolk County thanks to a law passed in 2019. “Tobacco holds the top spot as the number one cause of preventable death throughout the world. Responsible for at least 12 cancers and a multitude of other diseases, tobacco harms nearly every organ of the body and is the only legal product sold in America that when used as directed, kills up to half of its long-term users,” said bill sponsor Legislator William Spencer. “Here in Suffolk, we continue to promote and advance policies to make a difference in the quality of health for our residents. Pharmacies should support and foster public health, and the sale of tobacco products at these places is directly at odds with this common sense goal.”

“Pharmacies are places of wellness, where we get medication to make ourselves healthy,” said co-sponsor Legislator Rudy Sunderman. “Cigarettes are detrimental to our health and contradict the purpose of a pharmacy. This is a continued step in the right direction for the health of all our residents.”

Many large-scale pharmacy operations have already stopped selling tobacco products. The American Pharmacists Association, the American Society of Health-Systems Pharmacists, the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics overwhelmingly support a ban on pharmacy sales of tobacco products. The passage of this bill reinforces that pharmacies are businesses focused on health, and bolsters Suffolk County’s continued efforts to decrease tobacco use. Some of those efforts include: raising the age to purchase tobacco products to 21, prohibiting smoking at county parks as well as beaches, authorizing a tobacco-free policy for the county’s community college, more closely regulating smoking at buildings with multiple dwellings, and providing smoking cessation classes for the public through the Health Department.

Violations will result in a hearing before the Health Commissioner and could include a fine of up to $2,000.

The bill covers any product made or derived from tobacco that is “intended for human consumption.” That means any component, part or accessory of a tobacco product, cigarettes, loose tobacco, chewing tobacco, cigars, powdered tobacco, electronic cigarettes, herbal cigarettes, shisha, rolling paper, electronic liquids, and smoking paraphernalia.

Consumers will still be able to buy nicotine replacement therapies that are authorized by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, such as skin patches, gum and lozenges.

Law Limits Advertising of Vaping Products By Schools, Day Cares

Legislators in 2019 OK’d Legislator William Spencer’s bill to prohibit advertising of any age-restricted products within 1,000 feet of any school or school premises, any park or park property, any play-grounds and any duly licensed child day-care centers. Research indicates that minors are especially susceptible to the cognitive effects of persuasive advertising. Although advertisements for age-restricted products such as tobacco, alcohol, and vaping products target adults, children are likely to see these ads, especially if they are near places they frequent, like playgrounds. Under this new county law, businesses within the 1,000-foot buffer may still advertise within their buildings. The Department of Health Services is charged with enforcement.

The law was co-sponsored by Legislators Rob Calarco, Bridget Fleming, Samuel Gonzalez, DuWayne Gregory, Leslie Kennedy, and Rudy Sunderman.
Legislators in 2019 said yes to establishing a Youth Anti-Bullying Task Force. This task force brings together high school students to discuss bullying and prepare a presentation with recommendations on ways to decrease bullying both in and out of school.

Legislation sponsor DuWayne Gregory said young people are in a unique position to discuss challenges associated with bullying and to develop creative solutions. The idea for the task force came out of Gregory’s conversation with Devin Moore, a local student who was bullied and who now works to help other teens.

Legislators Sarah Anker, Kara Hahn, William Lindsay III, William Spencer, and Rudy Sunderman co-sponsored the legislation to create the task force.

The task force meets every month to develop strategies to stop bullying among students in Suffolk County. This is the only task force in the county made up entirely of students, with teenagers representing 18 private and public high schools.

The task force has already made recommendations for legislation. The group suggested that the Department of Health Services create a “Suffolk Stop Bullying Resource Guide” to help parents and children in grades K-12 who are dealing with the mental and physical impacts associated with bullying. The guide will be designed in collaboration with the members of the task force and the Long Island Coalition Against Bullying, which serves as the advisory organization for the task force. The guide will include information about available resources and programs that help students who are being bullied as well as educational information on how to identify bullying and cyberbullying.

The tick population on Long Island, and specifically in Suffolk County, is of growing concern with substantial public health impacts, including the spread of tick-borne diseases such as Lyme.

To test various strategies for more effectively managing the tick population, a resolution passed in 2019 and sponsored by Legislator Bridget Fleming directs the Vector Control Division of the Department of Public Works to conduct a pilot study to test the efficacy of various tick management strategies at Indian Island County Park.

Some strategies may include vegetation management, acaricide treatments, use of four-poster units, deer management, deer exclusion, and environmental monitoring. The field portion of the study will be two years. Then, Vector Control will submit a written report of its findings and recommendations to the legislature.

The resolution also requests that the Tick Advisory Committee ask the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation to ease restrictions on the management of the deer population.
Legislators OK Ban on Intentionally Releasing Balloons

What goes up must come down, and when the “what” is a balloon, it can spell trouble for the environment and sea life.

That is why legislators in 2019 approved a local law to prohibit the intentional release of helium-filled balloons.

“Through research and data, we know that the release of balloons has a devastating effect on our sea life. We live on an island and the majority of the balloons end up in our surface waters and on our beaches. Balloons become beach litter or entangled in boat motors that directly impact Long Island’s $4 billion ocean-related tourism industry,” Legislator Sarah Anker, sponsor of the proposal, said.

The Ocean Conservancy has determined that latex and Mylar balloons are the most common form of floating garbage within 200 miles of American shorelines. Balloons are frequently mistaken by sea life as food, and since balloons are not digestible, animals choke or die from intestinal obstruction. Animals also get tangled in balloon ribbons, and mylar and foil balloons never degrade. Balloon debris on Suffolk County beaches is prolific despite a prior county law prohibiting the release of 25 or more helium-filled balloons within a 24-hour period.

The local law passed in 2019, co-sponsored by Legislators Tom Muratore and William Spencer, prohibits the intentional release of any helium-filled balloon. It also calls for updated signage to be posted where balloons are sold. This law does not apply to the release of balloons being used for science experiments or testing procedures, hot air balloons, or balloons released indoors.

County Considers Electric Vehicle Charge Stations

Charging stations for electric vehicles may soon be coming to county properties.

The Suffolk County Legislature in 2019 approved a resolution directing the Suffolk County Department of Public Works to conduct a feasibility study into installing Level 2 Charging Stations at 10 county properties. The study will be used by the Legislature to make funding determinations for potential electric vehicle charging (EVC) stations around the county.

“Here in Suffolk we understand the need to address climate change because we are already seeing the effects,” said Rob Calarco, who sponsored the resolution. “From Superstorm Sandy to the massive scallop die-off that we saw this year as a result of warmer waters, we know what the results will be if we do nothing. One of the things we can do is to help our residents adopt all-electric vehicle technologies that massively reduce CO2 emissions. By getting the infrastructure in place now, we can help make it viable for people to switch to this better alternative for our environment.”

Currently, 42 percent of U.S. energy-related carbon dioxide comes from petroleum. Suffolk County has traditionally been heavily reliant on the use of conventional vehicles that use internal combustion engines. Cars are the primary mode of transportation for the vast majority of Suffolk County residents. Hybrid electric vehicles, plug-in hybrid electric vehicles, and all-electric vehicles produce 50 percent less in tailpipe emissions than conventional vehicles. Adoption of EVC stations has been primarily led by private companies, with stations at private retail locations in Suffolk County. However, there are large gaps in availability and many EVCs are at inconvenient locations, preventing electric vehicles from being a viable alternative to conventional cars.

“Location is everything when it comes to deploying this technology,” added Calarco. “Although we have seen some charging stations pop up around Suffolk County at retail locations, there are too many gaps and that is where the County can step in. We have property in prime locations that would serve as a great launching point to make all-electric vehicles viable and dependable.”

Level 2 EVC technology allows electric vehicles to recharge over a few hours, rather than the Level 1 EVCs many owners use at their homes to charge overnight.

Calarco intends to introduce further legislation to have EVC stations installed at county properties based on the study’s findings.
The Superstorm Sandy Review Task Force in 2019 released a report containing more than 100 recommendations for improving disaster response and storm preparedness after concluding its two-year study of the storm’s impact.

DuWayne Gregory created the task force in 2017, five years after Sandy made history as the deadliest and most destructive storm of the 2012 hurricane season and second most costly storm on record in the United States.

The panel, which consisted of representatives from local, county and state governments, advocates and experts, took a thorough look into government’s response to the storm and rebuilding efforts to assess what went well and identify areas for improvement.

“During the five years after Superstorm Sandy, it became obvious to me through conversations with my constituents and residents throughout Suffolk County that there were still many businesses struggling to get back on their feet and many residents still unable to return to their homes,” said Gregory. “The difficulties they were experiencing included everything from contractors who failed to meet their obligations, to reconstruction and renovating difficulties, to financial issues and how to secure the funds needed to rebuild their lives.”

The result of the two-year review is a list of more than 100 conclusions and recommendations based on the task force’s research and on the personal stories heard during public hearings the group hosted in 2018.

“We know many things today that we did not know in 2012, including that by addressing issues as bi-county, Suffolk and Nassau counties would be in a better place to manage disasters of all types; that shared resources and plans, updated infrastructure, better communication and enhanced scrutiny of licensing for contractors will best assist residents in their time of need,” Gregory added.

David Calone, former chair of the Suffolk Planning Commission, chaired the task force. The report is available on the legislature’s website.

Sea Level Rise Now A Factor In Roadway Construction

Sea level rise will now be taken into consideration when county roadways are constructed.

A proposal sponsored by Legislator Al Krupski and passed in 2019 directs the Public Works Department to take rising sea levels into consideration when constructing and reconstructing county roadways.

The intent of the legislation is to reduce flooding of roadways to keep them operational under high water conditions. Experts believe climate change and rising sea levels are causing increased instances of roadway flooding near the coastline throughout the county. In many areas, the flooding can prevent travel on the county roads during storms or abnormally high tides. Taking sea level rise into account will protect the county’s infrastructure from unnecessary wear.

The bill’s co-sponsors were Legislators Sarah Anker, Kara Hahn, and Rudy Sunderman.
County Relaxes Residency Requirements

New employees of county government now have five years to move to Suffolk after legislators relaxed the county’s residency law. Previously, county law required new employees hired by Suffolk to establish residency here within one year. The new law, put forth by William Lindsay III and co-sponsored by Legislator Tom Muratore, gives them five years. At the end of the five-year period, an employee would be required to maintain a residence in Suffolk.

Proponents of the bill felt that it was sometimes difficult for prospective employees to become county residents on short notice.

Additionally, other localities with residency requirements provide a grace period during which new employees can establish residency within the prescribed geographic confines.

Boost for Nonprofits Operating in Parks

Legislators in 2019 adopted a local law that permits not-for-profit organizations that operate in county park facilities to use in-kind donations of materials and labor to meet their contractual obligations for capital improvements.

Certain county park facilities are operated by nonprofit organizations with specialized interests and skill sets. Part of their contractual agreement with the county is that they are required to make capital investments into the facilities they operate. Sometimes, however, these nonprofits receive offers from construction companies and suppliers to provide donations of materials and labor to improve these county facilities at no cost to the county or the nonprofit.

This new law, sponsored by Legislator Tom Cilmi and co-sponsored by Kara Hahn, allows the nonprofit to receive credit towards their capital contribution obligations when they secure these kinds of donations.

This local law applies to all future contracts.

Legislators in 2019 also approved...

...a local law to improve the county’s affordable housing programs by requiring that some parcels developed as affordable housing with the assistance of the county remain affordable in perpetuity, sponsored by Legislator Susan A. Berland and co-sponsored by Rob Calarco and Kara Hahn.

...authorizing legal action against former Police Chief James Burke to recover monies associated with the settlement of a lawsuit that required the county to pay $1.5 million, sponsored by Legislator Robert Trotta.

... designating the month of November as “Teen Mental Health Awareness Month,” sponsored by Robert Trotta and co-sponsored by Legislators Sarah Anker, Leslie Kennedy, and Rudy Sunderman.

... authorizing the purple illumination of the H. Lee Dennison Building on April 13 of each year for Sarcoidosis Awareness, sponsored by Legislator Leslie Kennedy and co-sponsored by Legislators Sarah Anker, William Spencer, and Rudy Sunderman.

...a resolution to establish a task force to examine the feasibility of either purchasing or constructing a new police headquarters or fully renovating the current building to ensure that the Suffolk County Police Department has a functional building that can meet its needs now and in the future, sponsored by Legislator Steven Flotteron and co-sponsored by Legislators Sarah Anker, Tom Cilmi, and Kevin McCaffrey.

... designating June 27 as “Scoliosis Awareness Day,” sponsored by Legislator Tom Donnelly and co-sponsored by Legislators Leslie Kennedy, Tom Muratore, William Spencer, and Rudy Sunderman.

...a resolution requiring businesses in utility location services to give employees at least 8 hours off in a 24-hour period, sponsored by Rob Calarco and co-sponsored by Legislators Sarah Anker, Susan A. Berland, Tom Cilmi, Tom Donnelly, Bridget Fleming, Samuel Gonzalez, DuWayne Gregory, Kevin McCaffrey, Tom Muratore, William Spencer, and Rudy Sunderman.