



# NEWS...

From

## Legislator Tom Cilmi

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### Cilmi Files “Taxpayer Awareness Act”

Legislator Tom Cilmi filed a series of three bills aimed at promoting budget transparency and encouraging public input in the budget process. The three pieces of legislation, all of which Cilmi has put forth previously in one form or another, comprise what he calls the Taxpayer Awareness Act.

The first of the bills (IR-1703-2012) requires that the annual vote on Suffolk’s \$2.7 billion operating budget, which determines the County’s portion of property taxes, take place before Election Day each year. Cilmi said, “If members are going to make the argument for increased taxes, it should be done prior to Election Day so the voters know exactly where we all stand. To vote on the budget the day after Election Day, as has been done for years, no longer passes the smell test with the taxpayers.”

The second bill (IR-1704-2012) would force deliberations on the budget out into the open by requiring meetings to be held in public. Presently, a nine member “budget working group” is chosen by the Presiding Officer. The group meets privately to discuss the budget and piece together what’s referred to as the “omnibus” amendment, a bill which Cilmi says typically seeks to amend more than a thousand line items in the County Executive’s Recommended Budget. Cilmi says while other legislators are invited to listen in from outside the room, the working group is deliberately kept to nine members to avoid open meetings laws. Legislator Cilmi said, “There is absolutely no good reason why the whole process couldn’t and shouldn’t take place in an open forum where all legislators can have input on the record and where taxpayers, employees and all the other constituencies effected by the budget can weigh in.”

The final part of the Taxpayer Awareness Act (IR-1705-2012) requires budget amendments to be filed at least five days prior to a vote. Last year’s omnibus amendment was emailed to the full Legislature after 10pm the night of Election Day. The Legislature voted on the bill the following morning, a scant twelve hours later. Cilmi said neither the Legislature, nor the media, nor the public has enough time to fully comprehend the scope of the changes, and that leads to mistakes. “You have to ask yourself, ‘why would the Legislature want to release the bill at 10pm the night before the vote?’,” Cilmi questioned. “To most people the answer is obvious.”

Cilmi concluded, “The Legislature has been working this way for several years and I understand there’s a reluctance to change. No doubt these changes would present challenges. The process could potentially take longer and be more arduous. The added political pressure from public involvement could be substantial enough to actually impact decisions. But hard work, careful deliberation and tough decisions are what we get paid for and as far as public input impacting our decisions...isn’t that what representative government is all about?”

All three bills are proposed Local Laws and must go through the public hearing process. Public hearings will be held at regular meetings of the Legislature on August 21 at 2:30pm in Riverhead and on September 13 at 2:30pm in Hauppauge.

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