



Assemblyman
Steve Otis



Legislative Update

Fall 2021

Dear Friends,

My focus over this past year has been directed at using the state government to address many of the challenges the Covid-19 pandemic has presented to families, businesses, not-for-profits, municipalities and schools.

One highlight was passage in the state budget of my proposal to create a NYS Digital Inclusion Grant program to address the inequities that exist in digital literacy. In today's world these inequities leave many without access to essential information and services affecting health care, education, employment and countless other aspects of life. I am collaborating with national groups on this cause.

This year I was appointed Chair of the Assembly Science and Technology Committee, after having served as Chair of the Assembly Majority Conference. The new committee is focusing on a number of cutting-edge technology issues. The Digital Inclusion program was our first major victory.

Hurricane Ida brought great damage to the Sound Shore. Since the flood I have been working with local governments and not-for-profits on recovery efforts and connecting flood victims with federal and state assistance. The next step is to help communities move forward with flood mitigation projects. Every level of government needs to combine resources to address the flood risks that face many Westchester communities.

I hope the updates in this newsletter are informative. Please contact me if I can be of assistance on any issue or if you have ideas for state legislation or modifications in state policies. Please contact my Westchester office in Port Chester at 914-939-7028.

Warm regards,

Steven Otis
State Assemblyman

NYS Digital Inclusion Grant Program Included in State Budget

Digital Inclusion programs are the model used throughout the country to address existing disparities in digital access because of cost, race and age. I learned of these programs by following the great work at The STEM Alliance, a local not-for-profit that has been working on Digital Equity programs throughout Westchester and the region. The pandemic highlighted many existing inequities. With Covid-19, digital access and literacy became even more essential for accessing health care, education and employment opportunities. The Digital Inclusion model uses local programs that provide broadband access, a suitable device and the education, training and tech support to make a person digitally literate.

My proposal to establish a new \$15 million statewide digital inclusion grant program was included in the adopted state budget. The program will help local groups provide disadvantaged individuals and households the key elements necessary to provide up-to-date digital capability.

Local efforts at digital inclusion programs exist in parts of the state, and the State Education Department has held a series of Digital Equity Summits to focus on the importance of digital inclusion for education, workforce development and accessing health care. I am now working with state officials to launch the new program that will be made available to local not-for-profits, local governments, senior centers, libraries and other groups well-positioned to reach individuals in need of digital literacy. I am partnering with the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, a national not-for-profit promoting these programs across the country. I will keep you updated on the next steps for setting up the new state grant program.

I was a panelist on a webinar hosted by The STEM Alliance on the importance of local digital equity programs moderated by Executive Director Meg Kaufer, along with panelists Jordan Cormier from Youth Shelter of Westchester, Grace Battaglia of Open Door Family Medical Center and Dr. Fenix Arias of Yonkers Public Schools.



Major Victory for School Aid Funding

Over the last several years, I led the effort in the Assembly to increase state funding for the primary education aid category called Foundation Aid for school districts that receive less than their fair share. After the fiscal crisis of 2008-09 and related shortfalls in state revenues, Foundation Aid was not fully funded for many school districts around the state. My advocacy involved pulling together legislators representing low percentage districts to push for full funding.

In recent years this effort succeeded in securing increased funding for these districts in adopted state budgets by driving more funding to the districts that had been short-changed. This year those efforts culminated in a significant increase, with full funding to be phased-in as part of the next two state budgets. By advocating for these low percentage Foundation Aid school districts in Westchester and throughout the state, we have advanced our goal to have all districts receive 100% of the aid they are due under the state formula. The immediate beneficiaries on the Sound Shore are the New Rochelle, Port Chester and Rye Neck school districts with all districts gaining from our statewide education aid increases.



Senate Majority Leader Schumer and Congressman Bowman brought news of \$12 million in federal support for the New Rochelle LINC project, one of the city's most important improvements, which will reconnect the Lincoln Avenue corridor to New Rochelle's downtown.

The results will be safer roads, economic growth, green space, jobs and a united community. I joined with community leaders and local, county, state, and federal officials for this announcement which supplements \$6 million in state funds already approved.

State Priority: Covid-19 Economic Recovery

The impact of the pandemic was devastating to the economic life of New York and the nation. In January I was appointed to a State Assembly Working Group on Covid-19 Economic Recovery. Our focus was to create state programs to direct assistance to small businesses and individuals harmed by the pandemic. The state budget included an array of programs funded through state and federal funds to stabilize businesses and individuals financially harmed by the pandemic.

As programs were rolled out, my staff and I worked to communicate available funding assistance through workshops, mailings and newsletters to businesses, chambers of commerce, local governments and arts organizations.

- \$800 million in flexible aid for small-business grants
- \$25 million for the NY Restaurant Resiliency Grant Program
- \$100 million for a musical and theatrical production credit
- \$40 million for the Arts Recovery Grant Program for not-for-profit arts and cultural organizations
- An additional \$1 million for ARTSWestchester devoted to Westchester and Rockland arts organizations
- \$35 million in tax credits for restaurants in areas impacted by enhanced COVID restrictions
- \$2.3 billion for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) to landlords and tenants to cover unpaid rent
- \$100 million for a hardship fund for those who cannot access funds from the ERAP assistance
- \$575 million in federal homeowner relief, including a three-year, \$60 million commitment to fund the Homeowner Protection Program (HOPP) to provide legal assistance to homeowners facing foreclosure
- \$2.1 billion for the Excluded Worker Fund, to provide support for workers who do not have access to other state and federal unemployment assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic

The one-time federal contribution to many of these programs was essential to being able to provide business and individual assistance. Majority Leader Schumer, Senator Gillibrand and Congressmen Bowman and Jones worked hard to provide federal funding as well as essential funding to keep local budgets intact. Federal assistance to mass transit has allowed MTA, Metro-North and Upstate Transit budgets to remain intact until ridership returns.

The federal ERAP funds have already been obligated (165,000 applications resulting in 81,000 direct payments to landlords) with more qualifying tenant and landlord applications pending. On November 12th Governor Hochul and our New York Congressional Delegation has requested \$996 million in additional funding from the US Treasury Department to meet New York's needs.



Veterans Day Ceremony

Veterans Day was marked by events throughout Westchester and across the country to thank all those men and women who have provided service to our country. In my comments at events, I noted our appreciation of all who have served and the importance of the values of freedom and democracy their service represents. Pictured here is the Mamaroneck American Legion Post 90 ceremony.

Clean Water Grant Commitment Remains Strong Property Taxpayer Benefit Continues to Grow

In October, I hosted a Clean Water Infrastructure Grant Workshop with staff from NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation (EFC) to provide Westchester local governments, environmental groups and engineering firms with information on the 2021 state water grants.

The state budget included \$400 million dedicated to the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act (WIIA) and the Intermunicipal Grant (IMG), funding programs I helped initiate. I have hosted a Westchester workshop every year since the establishment of the grant program in 2015 to assist Westchester communities in securing grant funding from state programs.

To date, WIIA and IMG have provided \$1.2 billion in grants to local governments, including the \$4.5 million to Westchester municipalities for important clean water projects. The WIIA and IMG grants will again be administered by the NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation (EFC), which has done a great job of working with local governments during the application process, expediting post approval contracting and getting funds to municipal awardees.

These programs help fund drinking water and wastewater systems run by local governments. In 2020 I proposed we add a new program for municipal stormwater systems. As Hurricane Ida revealed, stormwater systems need new investment to expand capacity for larger water runoff and to repair collapsed or compromised infrastructure. My proposal was added to the environmental bond issue originally slated for 2020. The proposal was delayed until 2022 because of Covid-19. I am seeking to have the stormwater proposal advanced in the next state budget. Local governments need assistance for stormwater projects as soon as possible.



The annual Clean Water Infrastructure Workshop with staff from NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation has become an important tool in helping Westchester local governments secure state grants for water projects. The workshop was again held at the Jay Heritage Center in Rye. Pictured above at the workshop are Senator Shelley Mayer, Anne Jaffe Holmes, Executive Director of the Federated Conservationists of Westchester County, Marisa Rodriguez of FCWC, and Kevin Peraino, Executive Director of the Jay Heritage Center and Assemblyman Otis.



Senator Shelley Mayer and I, working with local officials in Port Chester, arranged for a van to transport Port Chester residents affected by Ida to the Storm Recovery Center in Mamaroneck.

Science and Technology Committee

I was very excited to be appointed Chair of the new Science and Technology Committee in the Assembly. Our first year has been productive with our work on digital inclusion aimed at closing the digital equity gap that exists in our state. We are also looking at policies to expand the installation of EV charging stations to meet the rapid transition auto manufacturers are making towards electric vehicles. Earlier in the year we held a Legislative Roundtable with the Consumer Protection Committee on the issue of data privacy and the need to have stronger laws to protect our privacy online. We are also reviewing cybersecurity issues and the climate change issues related to one form of cryptocurrency authentication called “proof of work” mining. There will be more to follow on these issues in the new year.



A ribbon cutting at Montefiore Hospital in New Rochelle to mark the opening of the hospital's upgraded emergency and radiology facilities as well as their new Medical Group Health Center to provide primary care to area residents. New York State provided \$44.3 million to support these upgrades. I joined Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, Senator Mayer, Mayor Bramson, County Executive Latimer and hospital officials at the event. In my comments at the ceremony, I reflected on the uncertainty New Rochelle's medical center faced over a decade ago and how the commitment of Montefiore and New York State today provide a strong message about maintaining and growing key medical services on the Sound Shore.

Hurricane Ida Reminds the Sound Shore of Flood Risks Recovery Must Be Followed by Action on Resilience

Hurricane Ida came quickly through the Sound Shore on September 1st, but the damage remaining is a persistent challenge to Westchester, New York City and the region. Lives were tragically lost, families were made homeless, some properties remain beyond repair and a region already trying to recover from the economic impact of Covid-19 now faces additional burdens.

Regional recovery centers were established in Mamaroneck and Yonkers bringing together federal, state and county agencies as well as the Red Cross. FEMA and the Small Business Administration remain a presence in Westchester.

In every community, local not-for-profits and more ad hoc volunteer efforts offered food, clothing, help with housing and other assistance to displaced families. In my weekly e-mail newsletters, I identified some of these not-for-profits doing the work and opportunities to support and volunteer. Some of these not-for-profits suffered their own flood damage yet found a way to serve those in need. They still need assistance.

After the storm I assisted in troubleshooting issues and helping with outreach for FEMA and the Red Cross as well as state and county agencies. Many Port Chester flood victims were without the ability to get to Mamaroneck. Working with the village and Mayor Luis Marino, Senator Shelley Mayer and I worked to bring service providers to Port Chester and found ways to get Port Chester flood victims to Mamaroneck.

There are flood victims in a number of communities whose homes are in highly vulnerable locations and question whether they can safely return. With officials at every level of government, we are looking for assistance and alternatives.

Following the flood, we were joined in Mamaroneck by Governor Hochul, Senators Schumer and Gillibrand and Congressman Bowman. I toured Port Chester flood damage with Congressman Jones. I can report that the commitment from the Governor, state agencies and our federal representatives has remained strong as we look to the next steps.

One course of action must be an increased effort to implement flood mitigation projects. The federal Army Corps of Engineers project for Mamaroneck, previously halted by the previous Administration, is now a priority. We had a very positive intergovernmental meeting with the Army Corps a few weeks ago. I have attended planning meetings for this project for many years. We need this project to start.

Other watersheds require attention as well. Many communities have studied their flood risks over many years, have implemented some projects and deferred others. Now is the time to review all engineering studies, factor in increased risk based upon more recent storm experience and select projects that make sense. I will continue to look for funding sources to help, including the stormwater grant program mentioned earlier in this newsletter.

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Assemblyman
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Otis**

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Following Hurricane Ida Assemblyman Otis toured storm damaged areas in every Sound Shore community. Senator Schumer, Governor Hochul, Mamaroneck Mayor Tom Murphy and the Assemblyman near where the Mamaroneck and Sheldrake Rivers meet in the village of Mamaroneck.



Port Chester Mayor Luis Marino, Congressman Mondaire Jones and Assemblyman Otis surveying road damage on Glen Avenue from the hurricane.