

NY pressures feds to exempt offshore drilling

BY RANDALL WASZYNSKI

Plans by the Trump Administration to expand offshore drilling sites has New York officials, in a bipartisan effort, focusing on the environmental and economic impacts on Long Island and its shores. The Department of the Interior on Feb. 15 approved Long Island as a public hearing location in New York upon requests from numerous state officials, congressman Lee Zeldin said.

Zeldin, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer, congresswoman Louise Slaughter and a wide host of other New York leaders on Feb. 8 denounced the Department of the Interior's proposition to open Atlantic waters to oil and gas exploration. The letter sent to the department's secretary, Ryan Zinke, outlined the risk of affecting the unique natural environments of Long Island and its marine industry, which contributes 13 percent of the islandwide gross domestic product.

"These threats to New Yorkers' coastal industries, public health and unique natural environments are unacceptable and should not be ignored," the members wrote in the letter.

The department initially scheduled a public hearing regarding the matter on Feb. 15 in Albany. But state Assemb. Steve Englebright, chair of the Environmental Conservation Committee, and other members of the Assembly felt that the hearing should be held on Long Island, where offshore drilling will be mainly affected.

In response, a public hearing was held by the NYS Assembly on Feb. 14 in the Suffolk County Legislative auditorium in Smithtown, led by Englebright, Commission on Toxic Substances and Hazardous Wastes chair Christine Pellegrino and Long Island Sound Task Force chair Anthony D'Urso.

"We wanted to provide a forum for people who, unlike myself, don't have to go to Albany and probably don't want to," Englebright said. "As a result, we'll be submitting a transcript of this hearing to the federal government. It's vitally important that we have an opportunity to properly vet and discuss the impacts of the proposed federal offshore drilling authorization that have been advanced by President Trump."

Town of Brookhaven supervisor Ed Romaine said that he also wrote to the Department of the Interior twice, once to express opposition to the drilling proposi-



tion and the other to request that at least one of the public meetings on the matter be moved from Albany to a location on Long Island. "This is not a Republican issue, this is not a Democratic issue, this is a common-sense issue," Romaine said regarding the department's proposition.

Assemb. Pellegrino said that the federal proposition is contrary to the direction the state has been moving energy-wise and environmentally. "At a time when New York State is moving forward to be a national leader in clean energy and taking concrete steps to ensure protection of the environment, the federal government is trying to take us backwards," she said.

The three chairs along with several other public officials, environmental conservationist group representatives and community leaders gave lengthy testimonies before an audience wielding signs with phrases like "Oil and Water Don't Mix" and "Save Our Waters."

Among marine industries, tourism is the main economy generator, contributing \$1.7

billion annually for Nassau and Suffolk counties and supplying 41,000 jobs island-wide, according to a study conducted at Farmingdale State College researching the economic impact of fishing on Long Island. The study indicates that the tourism-dominated marine economy grew each year in Suffolk County from 2005 through 2012.

Nine Suffolk County legislators wrote a separate letter to Zinke, spearheaded by Bridget Fleming, that tourism in coastal areas in their jurisdictions would be negatively affected by the offshore exploration plan. Susan Berland, one of those nine county legislators, said that there should be an exclusion of the Long Island and New York regions. "We requested that Suffolk County be immediately removed from consideration for any new oil- and gas-leasing programs," Berland said. "The importance of our coastlines to our tourism industry and our marine resources cannot be understated."

Florida was removed from consideration for exploration because of the projected effects on tourism, and Fleming said Long Island meets that caveat as well. The example of the situation with Florida "demonstrates the department's understanding that this program will negatively affect tourism in coastal areas," Fleming said. "The secretary's announcement recognized that not all areas are appropriate for offshore drilling, and stated the impor-

importance of protecting our coastlines."

New York attorney general Eric Schneiderman concurred that the state should be exempt from the department's proposed plan and is prepared to pursue litigation if necessary, said Peter Washburn, policy advisor for the state Environmental Protection Bureau. "Attorney General Schneiderman believes that the risk of oil spills and other harms from offshore oil and gas drilling pose an unacceptable risk to New York's coast and ocean resources and the jobs the economy depends on," he said.

A few officials and organization representatives also spoke at a rally held just before the hearing in the lobby of the William H. Rogers Building, outside the legislative auditorium. "It's the single-worst idea to come out of Washington in the last year," Assemb. Fred Thiele said.

Speaking similar to Thiele's discontent of the proposition, Aaron Virgin, vice president of the conservation-advocating Group for the East End, vouched that New York State has extended a bipartisan effort to oppose drilling off Long Island shores. "Our governor has now passed a \$2.5 billion infrastructure package to protect our water quality and infrastructure across the state, while the federal government is just doing the opposite," Virgin said. "This is just the beginning, and it may be the eleventh hour, but we're going to win this fight." ■

Free flu shot clinics

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone and health commissioner Dr. James Tomarken have announced that the Department of Health Services will be providing additional influenza clinics at no charge to residents in light of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's declaration of a public health emergency in New York. All residents 6 months of age and older who have not already obtained their flu shots are urged to do so as soon as possible. "The health and wellness of our residents is of utmost importance," said Bellone. "We thank Gov. Cuomo for providing the funding to allow us to increase access to flu vaccines to help save lives." Flu shots are available for residents 2 years of age and older at local pharmacies and for everyone 6 months of age and older at pediatricians' and health-care providers' offices. For those who are

unable to access flu immunization, the Suffolk County Department of Health Services will be providing flu immunizations to all residents 6 months of age and older at the following times and locations:

- Thursday, Feb. 22 from 2 to 4 p.m.
H. Lee Dennison Building, plaza level
100 Veterans Memorial Highway, Hauppauge

Entrance is to the left side of the building when facing the traffic court.

- Saturday, Feb. 24 from 10 a.m. to noon
Riverhead Library
330 Court Street, Riverhead
Entrance is on Osborne Avenue.

Residents with questions or who wish to preregister may call 631-787-2200 Tuesday, Feb. 20 through Friday, Feb. 23 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. ■

One stop, free shop

Free use of a mobile shower unit, free haircuts (men and women), free flu shots, a free hot meal, free clothing (socks, underwear, gloves, shirts, sweaters and other items as available), free blankets, free toiletries, free candy, and free compassion and caring will be distributed on Wednesday, Feb. 28 from 4-6:30 p.m. at the Congregational Church of Patchogue, 95 East Main Street. No proof of need, income or residency will be requested

or required. This event will be held with support from Hands Across Long Island, the Village of Patchogue, Suffolk County Police Department, Suffolk County Legis. Rob Calarco, Suffolk County Department of Health Services, Suffolk County Department of Mental Hygiene, New York State Office of Mental Health, the Congregational Church of Patchogue Soup Kitchen, and generous contributions of cash, food and clothing from people like you. ■