

EDITORIAL

Hands off funds for environment

Find other ways to fix Suffolk budget

Suffolk County is in dire financial shape. Higher expenses and lower revenues from the coronavirus pandemic are expected to produce a 2020 deficit of \$432 million to \$590 million, with a three-year shortfall of as much as \$1.5 billion. That's not easy to overcome, especially for a county that struggles in normal years but has not made systemic changes that would give it long-term relief.

So we applaud the everything-is-on-the-table approach espoused recently by county officials — assuming that everything, including bloated police contacts, is indeed on the table.

One thing that should not be on the table is the latest attempt by County Executive Steve Bellone's administration to play hanky-panky with environmental funding. The county has taken this road before, diverting money from a voter-approved drinking water protection program to help balance the budget. Now the administration proposes to renege on promises to pay back money already diverted from these funds, and then take some more.

For chutzpah, that's hard to beat.

The first of two Bellone proposals would divert for three years some of the money set aside since 1987 by a 0.25% sales tax for open space purchases with a promise to repay it from the capital budget — a dicey proposition in good times — and if that doesn't work, from a taxpayer stabilization fund. The second proposal involves ripping up a voter-approved agreement to repay as much as \$171 million already borrowed from a sewer stabilization fund to plug earlier budget holes, take another \$15 million from the same fund, and negate a recent court order to repay \$29.4 million from yet another raid on the fund during the term of Bellone's predecessor, Steve Levy. Bellone's administration has tried hard to get out of paying that \$29.4 million and has been



SUFFOLK COUNTY EXECUTIVE OFFICE

County Executive Steve Bellone has to close an expected 2020 deficit of \$432 million to \$590 million.

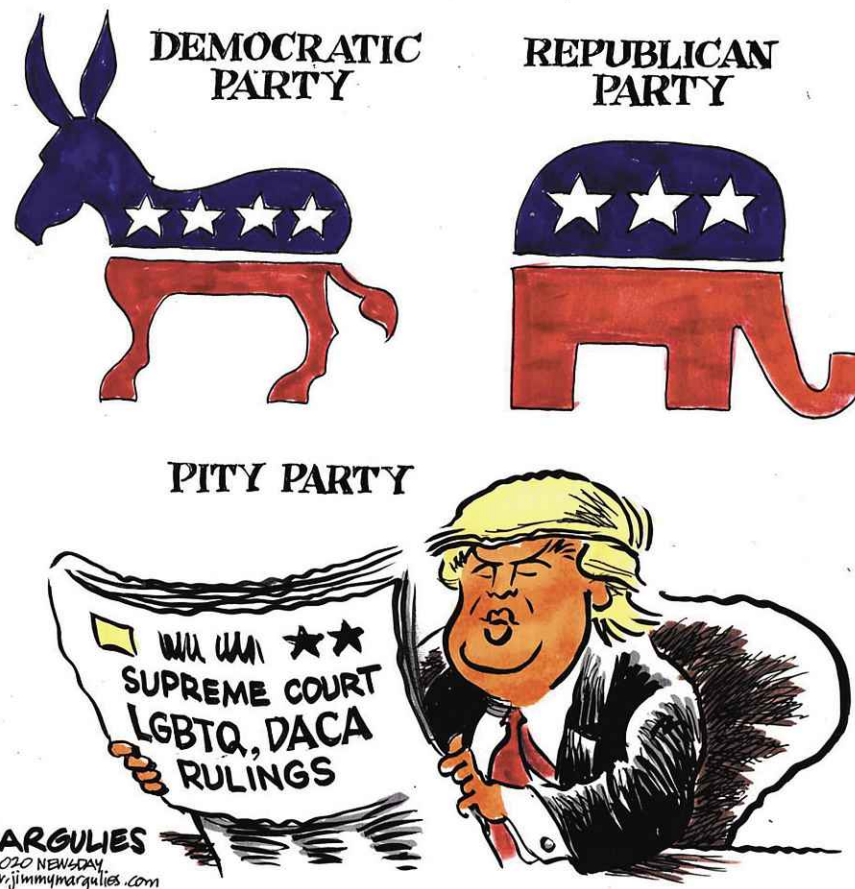
rebuffed every time in court.

This emits a deep stench. One proposal promises to repay environmental money the county wants for non-environmental budget needs. The other asks that the county be allowed not to repay environmental money already taken for non-environmental budget needs — money the county previously promised to repay. The irony is unmistakable.

If approved by the county legislature, the second proposal would be put to voters in a public referendum in November, as would be required. But Bellone's administration has squandered the voters' trust that it will respect their wishes. Even worse, it's hoping that voter approval will somehow overrule court orders on repaying the \$29.4 million. Yes, a restored sewer stabilization fund will have more than it can spend on prescribed purposes. But the proper resolution is to ask the public to spend that money on other clean water projects, not to plug holes in the general fund.

Suffolk's voters have repeatedly shown their willingness to vote for funding for clean water. But if Suffolk keeps making mischief with that money, it might find the public stops pulling that lever. Given Suffolk's clean water problems, that would be the biggest loss of all.

— The editorial board



JIMMY MARGULIES

■ Matt Davies is off. To see more of his cartoons: newsday.com/matt

LETTERS

Coliseum should be demolished

NYCB Live's Nassau Coliseum was poorly designed from the start, and that's a birth defect that can never be cured ["Nassau Coliseum closing barn doors," News, June 17].

The sight lines in the arena are bad, and the arena is too small at 15,000 seats. The building's height is insufficient and is not proportional to its width. I went to one event there decades ago and I never went again.

There is no public transportation to get there, and the parking fees are high and vary with each event, further discouraging attendance.

We missed an opportunity with Charles Wang's proposal for the area. To throw good money after bad to renovate the Coliseum, to me, was colossally stupid. The best solution now is a few

cluster bombs.

Daniel Okrent,
Hempstead

LIRR must prepare for new rush hours

Credit the Long Island Rail Road for cleaning and safety measures to address COVID-19 ["LIRR ridership still down as NYC reopening starts," News, June 9]. It has added cars on scheduled trains to promote social distancing. It's possible when not running the same number of rush hour trains as pre-COVID-19.

The problem I see is a lack of capacity to add more cars to trains when returning to 100% rush hour service. The LIRR has a limited spare fleet of electric cars. As ridership returns to 50% or more of pre-COVID-19 numbers, it'll be more difficult to maintain social distancing on platforms and trains at rush

hour. Who would want to occupy the center seat or sit face to face with another passenger?

A long, hot summer with air conditioning malfunctions could add to equipment shortages. The LIRR will still face periodic equipment malfunction, inclement weather, switching or crossing gate woes, and storm and signal problems contributing to disruptions resulting in canceled and combined trains. People will need to stand in the aisles. Trips will take longer with longer boarding time needed. Imagine the crowds at Penn Station shoulder to shoulder waiting for the next train.

Larry Penner,
Great Neck

Editor's note: The writer worked 31 years for the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Transit Administration Region 2 New York office.