

Critics tell town 'just say no' to transit plan

Town Board | Home rule vote on state bill to place MTA alternative on November ballot tabled for now

BY CARA LORIZ | EDITOR

Islanders opposed to participating in a proposed Regional Transit Authority gave Town Board members an earful at Tuesday's work session and encouraged them to tell officials advocating for the plan that Shelter Island wants no part of it.

Former Supervisor Al Kilb, Cathy Raymond, Meddi Shaw, Art Bloom, Jim Staudenraus and Dering Harbor Mayor Tim Hogue spoke against town support of a state bill to put the creation of a new Peconic Bay Transportation Authority to a non-binding public vote during the 2010 general election. Southold unanimously voted in favor of the bill last week. Certain state bills require "home rule" support from local municipalities prior to legislative action.

But a Town Board vote on the bill has been tabled for the time being, Town Supervisor Jim Dougherty reported at the opening of the work session discussion. The bill's sponsors — Assemblyman Fred Thiele and State Senator Kenneth LaValle — are working to add the town of Brookhaven to the five East End towns that would secede from the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) and form a new Regional Transit Authority (RTA). In the interim, Mr. Dougherty has requested that the amended bill stipulate that each town will have a separate, "free-



CARA LORIZ PHOTOS

"I don't see what benefit it is to us at this particular time," Tim Hogue said of replacing the MTA with an East End transit authority.

standing" vote should a referendum be authorized by the state legislature. Otherwise, Island votes would be counted with those of the other towns.

"Our constituents would be fully informed and they'd have a chance to say yea or nay," the supervisor said, adding that Senator LaValle's request for Town Board support of the bill "will come back."

The tabling of the bill did not stop Islanders from speaking out against it

and they were joined by some of the Town Board members.

"I wonder what they're thinking," Councilman Ed Brown said. "Government will grow" if a new transit authority involving the towns is established. "Other towns are entitled to do what they want," he said, implying that Shelter Island town wouldn't want to be a part of it. "I think it's going to cost more than the MTA tax."

A new tax imposed on businesses in 2009 along with MTA plans to end daily North Fork train service east of Ronkonkoma has fueled the renewed effort to create an alternate transit authority.

"If the MTA can't make it financially, how do they expect a brand new service with no infrastructure and a small customer base ... to succeed?" Mr. Kilb asked.

Ms. Raymond asked where the transportation route would go and Ms. Lewis responded, "This particular issue is not about that." The councilwoman indicated that the proposed coordinated bus and rail system, the East End Shuttle, "is totally separate" from the RTA vote. The shuttle plan proposes more frequent bus and train services on both forks and a small bus on Shelter Island. In 2009, the plan was reviewed by the Volpe National Transportation Systems Center, a research arm of the U.S. Department of Transportation, which described an RTA as a feasible option that "gives the East End communities greater control over the transit provided to the region, but it also comes with greater financial and operating risk."

In Town Hall, Mr. Hogue expressed his concern that "you might get on the train and not be able to get off" — that is, approving the home rule request could put the town on an irreversible path to involvement in the RTA. About a public bus on Shelter Island, he said, "I see it as adding to our congestion. I always feel we're carrying water for the Hamptons. I don't see what benefit it is to us at this particular time."

Mr. Hogue concluded, "If we have

these kind of concerns, should we just say 'no' now?"

"God knows I'm ready to fight the state over everything," began board member Glenn Waddington, "but at some point we have to look at what our authority is on that road," meaning State Route 114 and the town's right to keep a public bus off of it. He also commented that although a small bus is planned for Shelter Island, it could become a big bus.

Patricia Shillingburg was the only speaker advocating for the RTA but she emphasized that the East End Shuttle plan could go forward with or without a bus on Shelter Island. The 12- to 18-person bus envisioned for Shelter Island "might go back and forth on a hail bus system or a flex bus system" that makes stops off route. No bus stops are planned for Shelter Island, she said.

"We do not have to have a bus. It is not an obligation, it is an opportunity," she said, an opportunity to serve senior citizens, workers and others.

Ms. Shaw's opposition focused on the cost of an RTA, citing the highest numbers listed in the Volpe report, over \$200 million in up-front capital improvements and \$46 million per year to operate the most costly coordinated bus and train proposal. The current consensus proposal for a "Dual Concept" system is estimated to cost \$117 million to \$148 million in initial capital improvements and \$43.6 million in annual operating costs, according to the Volpe report. By comparison, the MTA's reduced services cost the East End an estimated \$60 million per year.

Ms. Shaw suggested that any taxes the town would have to pay to a new transit authority could go instead to senior citizens. "If there's something that the seniors need, I'd be happy to help them," she added.

Jim Staudenraus said that transportation needs can be met by the private sector and charities. "If there really is a need, we're 2 percent of the population, but we're 100 percent of the land-bridge to the two forks."

Art Bloom said, "My occupation is Republican ... This whole thing is a joke. It's not going to happen." The cost of driving a car is less than public transportation, he said.

Ms. Raymond spoke intensely saying, "I came to Shelter Island about 17 years ago because I seen what I liked — I didn't come here to bring what I left." She asked, "What seniors are going to go on that bus, how are they going to get to that bus? We've always been dependent on ourselves."

Councilman Peter Reich said, "Take the 50 laborers that get off at North Ferry and have them get off at three different places on the Island ... We'd be hearing about it."

When pressed on the issue, Mr. Dougherty indicated that a public information session would be scheduled before the Town Board vote on the revised home rule request.

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