

Jan. 22, 2017

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## Astoria evictees forced to leave Urban Ministry

BY BILL PARRY

More than a dozen low-income residents of the New York School of Urban Ministry dormitory residence in Astoria have moved out ahead of a Jan. 31 eviction date after the building was sold to a provider to turn the dormitory into a shelter.

The residents who have stayed are still working with the Legal Aid Society to remain in their homes past that deadline, but they have grown disheartened after one resident sent a check to the Christian non-profit for next month's rent, only to have it returned with a note saying "contact our attorney," sources said.

State Sen. Michael Gianaris (D-Astoria), U.S. Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-Jackson Heights) and state Assemblywoman Aravella Simotas (D-Astoria) urged the state's attorney general to investigate NYSUM Pastor Peter DeArruda for evicting the 39 residents during the holiday season.

In their letter to Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, the lawmakers

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# City to share Sunnyside Yards study

Mayor's 'game-changing' proposal to be made public after nearly two years

BY BILL PARRY

The mayor's vaunted plan to build affordable housing atop Sunnyside Yards has been in the dark for nearly two years since

its proposal, but that could finally change soon.

Mayor Bill de Blasio announced his "game-changer" of a plan nearly two years ago to build a deck over a portion of the Sunnyside

side Yards rail complex to support a massive 11,250-unit affordable housing complex, but not much has been heard about it since

The multi-billion-dollar proposal sent tremors through the

neighborhoods that surround the 180-acre rail yard used by Amtrak, New Jersey Transit and the Long Island Rail Road, despite an immediate rejection of the project by Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

The ambitious project's feasibility study — examining the state of local infrastructure, geotechnical conditions, how to reconfigure the rail yards while maintaining service, the limitations of the proposed deck structures, and of course, financial feasibility — has dragged on for a year and a half.

When the report missed its deadline this summer, critics suggested the project was quietly shelved because of its potentially exorbitant cost, but the mayor rejected that notion during a press briefing last week.

"I wouldn't say we moved it to the back burner because it's too costly. I'd say, right now, there would have to be more work done to get it where we want it to be," de Blasio said. "There obviously were real differences with the state of New York. We think our proposal made a lot of sense and could be very good for everyone. We also know it would create a

*Continued on Page 10*

## BATTLE OF THE BOTS



At Francis Lewis High School in Fresh Meadows, approximately 500 students competed in a two-day battle of the 'bots in the next-to-last round before the regional finals next month at Townsend Harris. These two teams — Stuyvesant HS in black and a Girl Scout team from Long Island in blue — were paired for the competition.

Photo by Michael Shain

## City Council passes van regulations

BY PATRICK DONACHIE

The City Council passed several pieces of legislation regulating the commuter van industry throughout the city, an industry with a prominent role in public transit-starved areas

*Continued on Page 10*



The Richmond Hill Phagwah Parade is set for March 12.

Photo by Michael Shain

## Prep begins for Phagwah Parade

BY GINA MARTINEZ

Preparations are underway for the upcoming 29th Annual Phagwah Parade in Richmond Hill.

The Joint Planning Committee of Phagwah Parade 2017 held a news

conference Tuesday to update the community on the progress being made and reported that the event would take place come rain or shine March 12. The parade is set to begin at noon on 133rd Street and Liberty Ave. and end at Phil Riz-

zuto Park where cultural programs, which include dances and live music, will take place.

Richmond Hill is home to the largest Indo-Caribbean community in the United States. Phagwah,

*Continued on Page 10*



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# Riders push to expedite main line track

Advocacy group gathers thousands of signatures to speed up Cuomo's expansion of Long Island Rail Road

BY MARK HALLUM

A group petitioning to expedite the construction of a third track along a corridor for the Long Island Rail Road known as the main line gathered signatures from 4,542 commuters last week.

The Right Track for Long Island Coalition petition, advocating for Gov. Andrew Cuomo's LIRR Expansion Project, was carried out at 17 stations throughout the Ronkonkoma, Port Jefferson and Oyster Bay branches which experience congestion from train traffic. Cuomo's proposal will add an artery while attempting to maintain quality of life for residents along the main line.

"We, the undersigned, are LIRR commuters and passengers who suffer regular delays and crowded trains because of the antiquated two-track bottleneck on the Main Line Corridor between Hicksville and Floral Park," the petition stated. "Con-



A group petitioning to expedite Gov. Cuomo's proposal to install a third track on the main line collected over 4,000 signatures.  
Courtesy of Right Track for Long Island Coalition

struction of a third track will help to solve this problem. We respectfully demand that it be built as soon as possible. It's high time for all Long Islanders to enjoy the full benefit and convenience of a modern railroad system."

The LIRR Expansion Project will add a third track to the 9.8-mile stretch of the Main Line between Floral Park and Hicksville, and eliminate all seven street-level crossings within the

construction zone. A draft Environmental Impact Statement released in December showed this will be possible without having to acquire any residential properties, while sound walls will be built to minimize the impact on surrounding homes.

"We know that past efforts to build a third track have been controversial – but thanks to the unprecedented engagement efforts by the governor's team and

the MTA – this third track is truly a win-win for all Long Islanders," said Dave Kapell, executive director of Right Track for Long Island Coalition.

Station upgrades will include longer platforms to eliminate the need to hold trains for passengers moving to different cars to exit and additional parking for the anticipated growth in future ridership.

Right Track for Long Is-

land Coalition is a grassroots group comprised of 385 businesses, organizations and individuals, including Queens Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Thomas Grech, who believes that providing better transportation alternatives to the people of Long Island will relieve road congestion in Queens, which has only two east-west thoroughfares for commuters going into Manhattan – the Long Island Expressway and the Grand Central Parkway.

"If there's more train service going east and west, it should alleviate additional cars going through the borough of Queens. The other part that's interesting to me, is that we used to be a place you always traveled through," Grech said. "It's kind of nice now that people continue to see the value of Queens for educational purposes with our seven colleges and universities, for our parks, for our restaurants, and so on."

"By increasing capacity

on one of the LIRR's busiest corridors and eliminating all street-level grade crossings, this project will result in less traffic, less congestion and a transportation network that meets the needs of current and future generations of Long Islanders," Cuomo said.

According to Right Track, the main line was built in the 19th century when the population of Long Island was roughly 50,000; a puny comparison to today's 7.6 million.

About 308,000 commuters use the LIRR everyday, with an estimated 40 percent of them passing through the Main Line, according to the MTA. The project could improve service for around 500,000 weekly passengers after considering the other branches passing through the Main Line.

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## Housing commissioner next to leave mayor's administration

BY BILL PARRY

A high stakes game of musical chairs is playing out at City Hall as another key member of the de Blasio administration heads for the exit. Less than two weeks after Carl Weisbrod, the mayor's chairman of City Planning, announced he was leaving his post, Housing Commissioner Vicki Been elected to return to teaching at New York University.

The city announced last week that under Been's leadership, the administration was securing affordable housing at a rate not seen since the Koch administration in 1989, extending affordability "for decades to come" at 41,600 homes and spurring construction of 20,800 new affordable apart-

ments. Her exit comes three years into de Blasio's signature Housing New York Plan after overseeing the financing of a record 62,500 affordable homes, enough for 170,000 New Yorkers.

"With her signature brand of grit and grace, Vicki created and implemented our ambitious affordable housing plan," de Blasio said. "She is a brilliant public servant and law professor, and her students are lucky to have her back."

Been said her time as the leader of the Department of Housing Preservation and Development was akin to being part of an all-star housing team.

"We came in with a bold agenda to change the paradigm for how we grow as a city," Been said. "We

promised to produce and preserve more affordable housing than ever achieved, to reach New Yorkers at a broad range of incomes, and to work with communities to ensure neighborhoods are diverse, inclusive, and rich in opportunity. We've changed the way we work to ensure that we achieve more affordable housing for every public dollar spent, and that our housing reaches the New Yorkers who need it most."

Been will depart City Hall Feb. 6. The mayor announced Tuesday that Maria Torres-Springer, the president and CEO of the New York City Economic Development Corporation, would take over Been's post at Housing while James Patchett takes over as the



Vicki Been (c) is stepping down after three years as commissioner of the Department of Housing Preservation and Development to return to academia. Courtesy of Mayor's office/Demitrius Freeman

leader at NYCEDC.

"As progressive thinkers and proven deal makers, Maria and James have worked closely with me to advance our most important initiatives," de Blasio said. "To-

gether, we will continue to build on the successes of our first three years, and make this city fairer and more affordable for everyone."

Torres-Springer oversaw the implementation of the Citywide Ferry Service that will be coming to Rockaway, Astoria and a second landing in Long Island City this summer. She has been in charge of other notable projects in Queens such as the Downtown Far Rockaway Neighborhood Plan and the new industrial center in Ozone Park.

At NYCEDC Torres-Springer's work included creating large affordable housing projects with mixed use retail and community spaces.

"Having grown up in Section 8 housing, I know

firsthand that the work we do is a lifeline to hundreds of thousands of families," Torres-Springer said. "Housing is the top expense for New Yorkers, and for far too many rising rents threaten their ability to stay in the city they love. I've spent my career helping people secure better jobs with better wages, and developing neighborhood projects that provide affordable homes and economic opportunity. Vicki leaves big shoes to fill, but I'm honored to have a chance to keep up the record-breaking progress she's achieved."

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# Simotas urges redesign of Astoria intersection

BY BILL PARRY

A temporary fix was not good enough at a notorious Astoria intersection and state Assemblywoman Aravella Simotas (D-Astoria) is calling on the city's Department of Transportation to take immediate action to improve the crossroad at 32nd Street, the Grand Central Parkway's Exit 45 ramp and Astoria Boulevard North.

When Simotas began her campaign to have the intersection redesigned in 2013, former Community Board 1 District Leader Lucille Hartmann called it "one of the worst intersections in the United States, maybe even the world" and the DOT responded by implementing a temporary fix in the spring of 2015.

In a letter to DOT Commissioner Polly Trottenberg, Simotas wrote that despite "over three years of repeated requests, this intersection remains a daily hazard to

motorists" and "improvements have been repeatedly delayed despite acknowledgment of the issue." She also said the temporary fix only pushed the dangerous confluence of cars farther west.

"This intersection is a daily danger to motorists and pedestrians and any further delay in making it safer is unacceptable and inexcusable," Simotas said. "New street designs and configurations are one of the cornerstones of the City's Vision Zero initiative and Astoria residents have the right to expect the city to keep its promise to improve street safety in every neighborhood and every borough."

Simotas had been promised by the DOT that a study of possible solutions would be finished by summer 2016. That summer came and went and the delayed study was then promised by October 2016 and as of Jan. 3, the Queens DOT office had no new date for completion of



Assemblywoman Aravella Simotas says lives are in danger at a notorious Astoria intersection and the Dept. of Transportation has not followed through on promises. Courtesy Simotas' office

the study, according to Simotas.

"DOT is aware of AM Simotas' concerns, and are currently working on a safety enhancement plan for this complex location," a DOT spokeswoman said. "We will present our proposal to the local community this year."

Meanwhile, Simotas, City Councilman Costa Con-

stantinides (D-Astoria) and state Sen. Michael Gianaris (D-Astoria) are planning a community gathering Sunday that will celebrate Astoria's diverse population and the harmony and fellowship that exists among residents that literally comes from all over the world.

"Astoria has been welcoming and becoming home

to different immigrant groups for decades. Astoria is a place where differences do not divide us; rather they bring life to our community," Simotas said. "We all live together, work together and educate our children together, and we are better for it. I hope our community serves as a peaceful example for the rest of the nation, for places in our country where change and cultural, religious and ethnic differences instigate fear and hate. Come to Astoria and see how we do it."

The three elected officials started planning the event in response to the post-election wishes of their constituents. The free community celebration will be held at the Variety Boys and Girls Club at 21-12 30th Road from noon to 1:30 p.m.

"This celebration will honor our community's diverse cultural history with performance and activity," Constantinides said. "At a time when we have seen a

marked increase in hate crimes citywide, seeing our neighborhood come together to celebrate one another is in the spirit of what makes us great."

The celebration will include performances from the Variety Boys and Girls Club Dance Troupe -- "The Vipers," the Astoria Young Women's Leadership Academy "Digital Dance Project," and remarks from faith leaders.

"Queens is the most diverse county on Earth, with people from more than 100 countries co-existing peacefully for generations," Gianaris said. "I am proud to represent a community that is willing to unite and organize, to make sure our neighborhood remains a welcoming, safe place that everyone is happy to call home."

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# Avella doubles-down on opt-out for bioswales

BY MARK HALLUM

State Sen. Tony Avella (D-Bayside) upped the ante on his opposition to bioswales in his northeast Queens district in a letter addressed to Mayor Bill de Blasio and the acting commissioner of the Dept. of Environmental Protection Vincent Sapienza.

Avella is not only calling for an opt-out option for the installation, but also on the drilling required to determine the eligibility for locations of bioswales.

"As you are both aware, I have been, and will continue to, fight for a full opt-out program for residents," Avella said in the letter. "During our conversations and meetings we agreed that no actual construction would occur in my Senate district, but soil testing could be done in the interim while DEP reviewed our concerns. However, after witnessing the soil testing in person, I am calling for an immediate halt to the soil testing process as well."

Bioswales are green infrastructure installations cut into the pavement to absorb rainwater and remove some of the burden from the sewer system. The ultimate goal of a bioswale project is to clean up waterways, in this case, Flushing Creek and Flushing Bay, a DEP spokesman said in July. A similar project in Brooklyn launched in June by the city agency will cost \$35 million and install more than 800 bioswales to improve water quality in Jamaica Bay.

But Flushing residents were flustered when they discovered Dept. of Design and Construction workers prospecting outside their homes, marking sidewalks with green paint to keep track of locations where a bioswale might be installed. Many did not



Avella is expanding his request to allow residents to opt-out of bioswales in their neighborhood to drilling.

Courtesy of state Sen. Tony Avella

know what a bioswale was until they were handed a pamphlet by the workers.

Residents complained at a July news conference hosted by Avella that bioswales will take away from the parking spaces, while trees planted in the installations will cause sidewalks to crack, yet again costing homeowners money to fix. Other fears go back to the issue of city trees being planted in the homeowners' yards and then neglected by the Parks Department responsible for their upkeep.

Joseph Branzetti, president of the Friends of Fort Totten Parks and the Northwest Bayside Civic Association, said the neighborhood of Murray Hill is the lowest point in Flushing and basement floods are common. He feared a bioswale will only aggravate this problem.

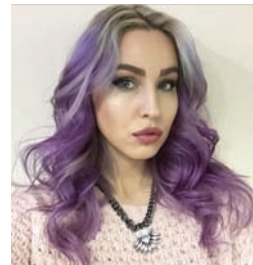
"Upon receiving complaints from constituents, I visited their homes to see the soil drilling in process. Not only is it in-

credibly loud, but it looks more like drilling for oil than soil testing," Avella said. "It destroys the green strip between the street and sidewalk and can possibly damage the sidewalk as well."

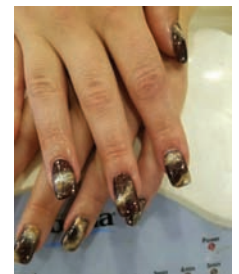
Installation of 321 bioswales in Maspeth, Ridgewood and Sunnyside began in June with the aim of cleaning up Newtown Creek, which separates Queens and Brooklyn, and catching up to 38 million gallons of rainwater every year. The creek is one of the nation's most polluted waterways with heavy industrial development along the banks of its 3.5-mile length. Over 50 oil refineries dumped an estimated 30 million gallons of fuel along with toxins from petrochemical plants, fertilizer and glue factories, and other industries in the creek starting in the early 1800s.

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# 6 Flushing demands apology

Elected officials take issue with Steve Harvey's remarks

BY GINA MARTINEZ

Flushing elected officials are taking issue with a recent segment on comedian Steve Harvey's talk show that implied Asian men are not dateable.

State Assemblyman Ron Kim (D-Flushing), City Councilman Peter Koo (D-Flushing) and U.S. Rep. Grace Meng (D-Flushing) were among those who denounced the bit as "racist" in a letter demanding an apology from the comedian, who also courted controversy last week by meeting with President-elect Donald Trump.

The offending jokes were made on Harvey's nationally syndicated talk show "Steve Harvey" last Friday during a portion of the program where he mocked self-help books, including "How to Date a White Woman: A Practical Guide for Asian Men."

Harvey joked that the book should be only one page long, just asking "Excuse me, do you like Asian men?"... "No, thank you." He also said the same would be applied to black women., saying "one page too!..." "You like Asian men?" "I don't even like Chinese food. It don't stay with you no time ... I don't eat what I can't pronounce."

"We are writing to demand an immediate public apology for your offensive, classless comments on a re-



Flushing lawmakers are demanding an apology from Comedian Steve Harvey.

Photo by Evan Vucci/AP

cent segment of 'Steve Harvey,'" the elected officials wrote in their Jan. 13 letter. "In just one short clip, you and your producers managed to insult Asian men, white women, and black women with a single skit. Your statements were racist, sexist, and completely inappropriate for a public figure on a show broadcast to millions."

Kim said the bit was offensive not just to Asian-Americans but to women as well.

"I found Steve Harvey's comments offensive and dis-

appointing," he said. "Like other recent media segments mocking minorities, this clip crossed the line. It was insulting to not only Asian-Americans but women of all races. We are calling on Mr. Harvey and the show's producers to issue an official apology for this content and remove it once and for all. As fellow Americans, I believe we have an obligation to denounce prejudiced remarks and views like these whenever and wherever they appear, and thank my colleagues in government for standing together on this issue."

A spokesman for the "Steve Harvey" show later released a statement apologizing if the skit offended anyone.

"Steve Harvey was poking fun at unusual book titles in a comedic segment from Friday's show," the rep said. "His comments were never meant to demean the Asian community and the show sincerely apologizes to anyone who was offended."

Reach Gina Martinez by e-mail at [gmartinez@cnglocal.com](mailto:gmartinez@cnglocal.com) or by phone at (718) 260-4566.

# Bayside business closes after 40 years

BY MARK HALLUM

schools.

The Dinette & Furniture Center Inc. at 21621 Northern Blvd. will be closing its doors after 40 years in Bayside.

Councilman Paul Vallone (D-Bayside) presented the Iranian-born owner, David Yousefzadeh, and his family with a commemorative citation in honor of their years of excellence in the community Tuesday.

"The Dinette & Furniture Center has provided incredible service for years and will be sorely missed by the Bayside community," Vallone said. "I wish David and his family all the best in their future endeavors."

Yousefzadeh was born in Kashan, Iran, in 1944 and came to the United States to pursue his education. He had finished his graduate degree when he returned to Iran briefly to marry his wife, Madeline, in 1969.

He completed his Ph.D in physics from Kansas State University in the early 1970s. However, Yousefzadeh's principles and the Vietnam War would impede his ultimate goal of practicing science. The war dominated the field in those days and Yousefzadeh stood by his pacifist values by instead teaching science in

Once the young couple began having children, Yousefzadeh decided to go into business. Yousefzadeh has worked seven days a week at The Dinette & Furniture Center since it opened in 1978, Vallone's office said, adding how the owner has served the community as a fair and humble salesman who takes care of his customers by providing the best information possible about products.

"David embodies the 'American Dream,'" Yousefzadeh's daughter, Rebecca Sassouni, said. "He worked devotedly and tirelessly, served his customers, built a family with his wife and three daughters, and provided each child with wonderful college and graduate educations."

The Dinette & Furniture Center will be closing at the end of January and will join various other businesses which have shuttered in Bayside in recent months with Party City on Bell and Northern Boulevard being the most recent closure.

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# Kew Gardens has worst streets in city: IBO<sup>9</sup>

BY PATRICK DONACHIE

Kew Gardens has the worst streets in the city, according to an analysis by the city's Independent Budget Office.

The streets of Queens are in fairly good shape, with only Brooklyn streets in better condition, according to the report. The IBO analyzed Department of Transportation data to come to its conclusions.

The neighborhood with the worst percentage of quality streets is Kew Gardens, with only 28.2 percent of the streets in the neighborhood considered "good" quality.

City Councilwoman Karen Koslowitz (D-Forest Hills) said the IBO's report on the DOT data served as confirmation for a well-known fact in her district, with many roads in poor conditions. She said many Kew Gar-

dens streets had been ripped up in the past year to replace water and gas main lines, which she said the IBO report did not necessarily take into account.

"My office was constantly communicating with various New York City agencies while these efforts were going on, working to ensure that the community's concerns about water shut-offs, fire hydrant placement as well as milling and paving schedules were addressed," Koslowitz said.

The councilwoman, whose district also includes Forest Hills, Rego Park and parts of Richmond Hill, said she had put numerous requests into DOT for surface repair work, requests she said were still pending, and had met with the Queens DOT commissioner to discuss the issue.



Queens got mostly good marks from the IBO, though Kew Gardens was found to have the worst roads in the city.

The DOT performs a street quality assessment on a rolling basis for 18 months, rating sections of each street in the city with a rating from 1 to 10.

The DOT categorizes 1-3 as "poor" quality, 4-7 as "fair" and 8-10 as "good."

In Queens, the IBO determined that 71 percent of streets in the borough

were rated as "good." Citywide, 70.2 percent of streets were found to be in "good" condition, with 29.2 percent of the streets listed as "fair" and 0.6 as

"poor." Brooklyn was the borough with the best-rated streets, with 75.1 percent listed as "good," while Staten Island was found to be the borough with the fewest number of "good" rated streets, at 59.6 percent.

In the Bronx, 68.5 percent of streets were labeled "good," while in Manhattan the percentage was 66.3.

The best rated neighborhood for streets in Queens was Laurelton, with 84.9 percent of streets rated as "good," according to the IBO's analysis. A neighborhood-by-neighborhood map can be found at the IBO's website at [ibo.nyc.ny.us](http://ibo.nyc.ny.us).

*Additional reporting by Mark Hallum. Reach reporter Patrick Donachie by e-mail at [pdonachie@cnglocal.com](mailto:pdonachie@cnglocal.com) or by phone at (718) 260-4573.*

Photo by Michael Shain

QUEENS WEEKLY, JAN. 22, 2017

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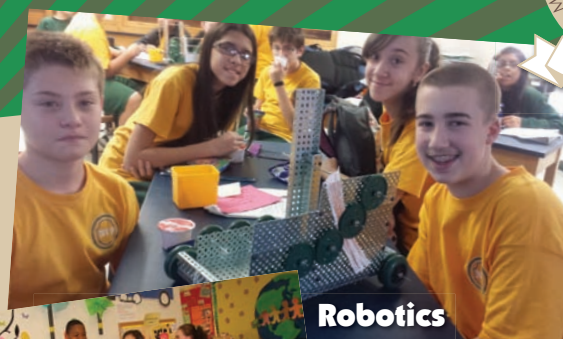
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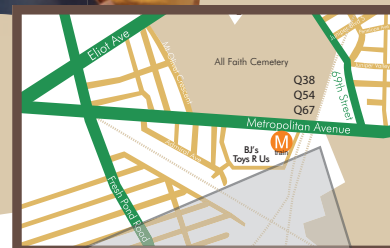
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# Evictions

Continued from Page 1

ers said the majority of the residents pay rent of between \$400 and \$500 a month, and would not be able to afford market-rate apartments in New York City. They pointed out “NYSUM confirmed that they intend to remove these tenants in order to operate a homeless shelter on the site, which these tenants may very well need due to NY-SUM’s actions.” The elected officials said DeArruda suggested the non-profit organization was losing money on the residence and is general facing hardships.

“At a time, when our city is grappling with an unprecedented homelessness crisis, we need to make sure we’re doing everything possible to keep people in their homes and protect them from unscrupulous landlords or any undue hardship that might result from their poor management,” Crowley said. The lawmakers included a document that indicates the property is fully paid off and owned by NYSUM, clear of any mortgage.

Schneiderman received the letter and discussed the case with the state Education Department, which has primary jurisdiction over



State Sen. Micahel Gianaris will introduce legislation to help protect evictees like Linda Lane Smith (r) from tenant blacklisting.

Courtesy Gianaris’ office

educational institutions, but his office would not comment further. Gianaris’s spokeswoman Liza Acevedo said Schneiderman’s office “reached out to Pastor DeArruda, who said he’s still moving forward.”

Gianaris announced Monday that he will introduce legislation that would prohibit tenant blacklisting. Currently, when tenants assert their rights in court in a landlord-tenant action, they can find themselves on a blacklist that keeps them from being able to secure future housing. Residents of NYSUM expressed concerns about protecting their rights to housing in court due to possible blacklisting.

“Too many residents get the short end of the stick sim-

ply by asserting their legal rights,” Gianaris said. “We cannot allow unscrupulous landlords to discriminate against tenants who are simply fighting to keep a roof over their heads.”

Over 90 percent of landlords are now represented by attorneys in New York City Housing Court, while far fewer than 10 percent of tenants do not have legal representation, according to Gianaris, who continues to visit the remaining tenants of the residence urging them to stay in their homes and work with the Legal Aid Society.

Reach reporter Bill Parry by e-mail at or by phone at (718) 260-4538.

# Van

Continued from Page 1

in southeast Queens.

The three pieces of legislation were passed by the Council’s Transportation Committee Tuesday afternoon followed by a Wednesday vote by the full body. Councilman I. Daneek Miller (D-St. Albans) co-sponsored two of the pieces of legislation.

Int. 860-A would require an annual report be conducted by the Taxi and Limousine Commission on safety in the commuter van industry, which would include data on licensed and unlicensed vans. The law would also limit the number of licensed commuter vans to 735 citywide. The number could increase if the TLC determines more vans are needed and safety is not affected. Int. 861-A would increase potential civil and criminal penalties for owners of unlicensed commuter vans.

“The legislation will help us solve the dilemma and bring some much-needed control to an often-unregulated industry,” Miller said during the Tuesday committee hearing. “These are necessary to control the proliferation of illegal vans that are creating mayhem in communities and those who choose to operate outside of the law.”

TLC data indicates there are 336 licensed commuter vans operating in the city, with 53 different licensees, 36 of which are located in Queens. However, some commuter vans, particularly many located in southeast Queens, are unlicensed. Miller and other community residents complain about these vans, saying the drivers are often erratic and dangerous.

Despite the concerns, “dollar vans,” nicknamed for the affordable price, are often one of the only means for commuters to reach public transit from residential areas in southeast Queens. The only subways in the area are the E, F and J lines, which terminate in downtown Jamaica and are a significant distance from neighborhoods like Springfield Gardens or South Jamaica.

St. Albans resident Tony Johnson said rides on an MTA bus often turn what should be a 20- to 30-minute commute into an hour or more, speaking during a rally to protest congestion pricing last June. He said he still refused to travel using unlicensed commuter vans.

“Those vans are dangerous,” he said. “It doesn’t make any sense to save 75 cents and risk your life. At least with the bus, I know I’m going to be safe.”

Additional legislation sponsored by Councilman Jumaane Williams (D-

Brooklyn) would amend certain regulations on the books for licensed commuter vans, maintaining Department of Transportation oversight on established routes but removing a mandate that drivers must keep a record of passengers.

The TLC said it was supportive of the licensed commuter van industry, with a spokesman saying the commission would increase safety in the industry by supporting licensed owners and operators.

Miller first proposed the legislation in summer of 2015 and in an October 2015 hearing, Meera Joshi, the commissioner and chair of the TLC, said the commuter van industry offered affordable transportation for areas like southeast Queens.

“This is especially true in neighborhoods that have less access to public transit where commuter vans allow passengers to share rides at minimal cost, as little as \$2,” she said. “In doing so, commuter vans connect people with other neighborhoods, often other new immigrant communities, at what may be faster times than public transit.”

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# Parade

Continued from Page 1

or Holi, is a Hindu spring festival also known as the Festival of Colors. During Holi, Hindus usually celebrate in the streets and spray friends and family with colored powders.

Just two years ago the parade was involved in controversy due to infighting. The parade’s permits were canceled by the NYPD for the first time in 2015 after disputes between the Hindu Parades & Festivals Committee and The Federation of Hindu Mandirs. The Hindu Parades faction had made accusations against the Federation of Hindu Mandirs and the NYPD. The Hindu Parades and the Federation both applied for permits on the same day last year, but the Hindu Parades had its permit pulled. Hindu Parades

claimed it filed first in a civil suit against the NYPD. The Federation stopped the parade from being held for the first time since 1988.

Since then the planning committee has been composed of members from the both the Hindu Parades & Festivals Committee Inc., Hindu Mandirs Inc. and The Arya Spiritual Center, which are all working together to organize the parade.

The committee only had good news, telling reporters that all permits have been approved by the NYPD and that all key elements of the parade, including floats, performers, vendors and music, are in place. The committee members said they plan on making this year’s parade the best it has had in years by reaching out to the community and working with them.

“We are proud to con-

tribute to the cultural diversity of the great city of New York by organizing and implementing an event like this parade,” Sagar Rajpal, a member of the planning committee, said. “We recognize that the Phagwah Parade is the community’s main cultural event and are committed to ensuring that we produce a spectacular parade.”

Rajpal hopes this year more members of the community will be included.

“We want to be inclusive of the entire community,” he said. “Not just Hindus in the Caribbean community but from India, Sri Lanka and from all different places. We are reaching out for everybody to join.”

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# Sunnyside

Continued from Page 1

huge amount of affordable housing.”

De Blasio said that a combination of opposition from both near and far made it difficult to move forward on the project.

“Fair neighborhood concerns have been raised about potential congestion, and about amenities and transportation, things the community would need. But I think it could all be put together and be an incredible thing for the people of Queens. But we’re going to have to have more work done with the community, and more work done with

the state to get it to be a more immediate opportunity.”

Following the briefing, Deputy Mayor for Housing and Economic Development Alicia Glen told TimesLedger Newspapers that some of the mystery surrounding the proposal will be lifted in the next few weeks.

“We’re going to be sharing with people some of the results of the feasibility study that has been undertaken, and that is something we committed to do,” Glen said. “We’re continuing to evaluate the work that has been done by all the consultants and have conversations with multiple stakeholders at what is a very complex site.”

While the deputy mayor has not shared any details of

the feasibility study yet, she did mention that a project of this magnitude is not easy to execute.

“It is neither on the back burner per se nor is it the game-changer,” Glen said. “Nor is it the No. 1 thing that we are working on. Any major project which is of infrastructure and a neighborhood building effort transcends administrations, and it’s going to be a decades-long effort, but we are committed to continuing to evaluate it and see where we can make concrete progress.”

Reach reporter Bill Parry by e-mail at bparry@cnglocal.com or by phone at (718) 260-4538.



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