

Sound advice for a regional gem

There are roles for government and citizens in protecting Long Island Sound

BY TIM BISHOP AND LEAH SCHMALZ

The Long Island Sound recently received a report card.

The State of the Sound report uses state and federal data, vetted by a team of scientists from the Long Island Sound community, to grade the efforts of New York and Connecticut in protecting the Sound.

In some ways, the region is doing well. Protecting and restoring coastal marshes, dunes and forests earned an A; restoring access to rivers and spawning grounds for fish, an A-; keeping plastics and other trash off our shoreline, a B-.

Other areas tell a different story. Ensuring that sea creatures are able to survive in the western Sound, preventing pollutants from running off city streets into our waterways, and taking care of our last great coastal spaces all receive a C-; stopping chemical and industrial pollutants, a C; and keeping untreated sewage out of our rivers and the Sound barely passes with a D+.

Overall, the State of the Sound report shows that while some improvements have been made in terms of habitat restoration, litter and low oxygen, there's still work to be done to make our Sound a healthier, cleaner place and to build on its \$9.5 billion-a-year benefit to the regional economy.

Local land-use commissions and municipal planners make decisions every day that have an impact on our coastal open spaces, stormwater runoff, public access areas and wildlife. Keeping the health of Long Island Sound in mind as they act or advise on applications and municipal projects is the first step. For instance, green infrastructure or low-impact projects should be required for all new development proposals along the coast.

State legislators in New York and Connecticut wield enormous power over the health of the Sound. From supporting planning for climate adaptation to ensuring that state funding is available for communities to improve their stormwater and wastewater systems — and cre-



Views of Long Island Sound from Morgan Park in Glen Cove

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ate thousands of jobs — these elected officials have vowed to work together as a united front.

And our federal delegation is fighting hard in Congress to secure resources for sewage treatment plant upgrades, habitat restoration and green infrastructure. Congressional leaders can also help improve our grades by continuing to fight for reauthorization and for the appropriation of ample funding for preservation and restoration projects on Long Island Sound — such as water-quality monitoring programs in local embankments and harbors, sea-level-rise planning and educational programs for kids. Without federal funds, we won't

have the resources to protect this regional gem.

But the burden doesn't fall solely on government officials. The residents of this region own Long Island Sound, and there are steps everyone living in its watershed can do to help the Sound get a better report card next year:

- Enjoy the wildlife when visiting our marshes and beaches, but don't disturb them.
- Volunteer at beach cleanup or habitat-restoration projects.
- Get involved with your local watershed association, land trust or conservation commission.
- Reduce use of fertilizers and toxic pesticides.

■ Clean up after dogs — near beaches, rivers and even in your own yard — to keep bacteria out of the water.

■ Dispose of trash properly to help keep cigarettes and other litter off beaches.

■ Purchase a Marine and Coastal District license plate in New York.

■ Let your elected officials know you care about protecting the Long Island Sound.

The grades in the State of the Sound aren't just a wake-up call — they're a call to action. Many generations have enjoyed the beaches and habitats of the Sound; now we must work together to protect our legacy and ensure our children, and their children, can build the same fond memories we did.



Rep. Tim Bishop (D-Southampton), is the ranking minority member of the House's Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee.



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Mandates, the cockroaches of state spending

Everyone wants to reduce their numbers, but they seem almost impossible to kill



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Newsday's editorial board frequently meets with people in public life: school superintendents, state and local elected officials, law-enforcement agents. And one question that comes up all the time is how to reduce the cost of public services.

It was an issue back when the only urgency was New York's position as No. 1 or No. 2 in the nation with the highest combined state and local tax burden — a "distinction" New York trades from year to year with New Jersey. Now, as the Great Recession has tightened the

screws on public budgets everywhere, the question is more pointed: Which will it be, raise taxes or cut services?

Elected officials, candidates and community leaders usually don't want to choose between these unpopular alternatives. Sometimes they try a dodge: "Cut waste, fraud and abuse!" Hard to argue with that. No one ever campaigns for more inefficiency, dishonesty and corruption.

The other dodge — or at least that's how I thought of it until recently — was, "Cut unfunded mandates!"

"Mandates" come up often as the culprit forcing unnecessary costs on local governments and agencies — but ask for an example, and people have trouble responding. It's not that the prob-

lem doesn't exist; it's that it's so pervasive, and it's hard to know where to begin.

Mandates were once well-meaning state rules for how municipalities and school districts should do business. Now, the rules have hardened in concrete. They're bureaucracy; they're micromanagement. And, as of December, they're available in 40 pages of highly descriptive detail — 238 separate mandates — that a task force spent nearly a year compiling for Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo.

The report from the 2011 Mandate Relief Redesign Team lists burdensome rules and paperwork like a bundle of hard knots. Permit local governments to make discretionary purchases on public works projects up to \$50,000, instead of \$35,000. Reduce time-consuming requirements surrounding foster care reports, while still making them useful to the courts. Allow nursing homes to keep some records

electronically.

Cuomo has highlighted mandate relief in two subsequent State of the State speeches — in 2011 and again early this month. In fact, he said pretty much the same thing both times: We need to fix the problem. He had to repeat himself because, while the redesign team did come up with a long list of mandates, it got very little relief accomplished.

Why? Well, first, the team of 27 — representing schools, municipalities, the State Legislature, business and civic organizations — had to agree on which mandates to relieve. The members came up with just \$410 million worth — a small drop in a \$132.5-billion state budget sea. Of that, the legislature wiped out just 22 mandates — for an estimated statewide savings this year of \$125 million. State agencies can save another \$40 million by rewriting regulations.

Mandate relief was supposed

to ride a white horse to rescue municipalities and school districts from the tough new 2 percent cap on property tax growth they must begin living with this year; \$165 million won't do it.

Rather than admitting defeat, the governor and State Legislature formed a Mandate Relief Council — 11 members, including state bureaucrats and legislators — to consider the other 216 mandates. Cause for optimism is slight.

Former Gov. David A. Paterson used to float an idea that all state rules should expire at a certain date unless legislators voted to keep them. That's drastic, but it may be New York's only real hope of undoing the knotty bureaucracy that yokes this tax burden to citizens' shoulders.

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