

The Larchmont/Mamaroneck Local Summit

County Executive Astorino "A Definite Maybe" in run for Governor; addresses hot topics in recent Breakfast Summit

BY LINNET TSE

Newly re-elected County Executive Rob Astorino did not deny a potential run for Governor of New York State while addressing a packed crowd hosted by The Larchmont-Mamaroneck Local Summit at the Nautilus Diner, Tuesday, January 21st. When asked to address "the elephant in the room" about his potential candidacy, Astorino replied, it is "a definite maybe."

Perhaps providing a window into an upcoming stump speech, Astorino blamed "Albany" for unfunded mandates which plague local governments. Although 2014 marks a fresh start, Astorino noted that the county is faced with "the same old problems, daunting problems... most of them perpetrated by Albany." Using the cost of pensions as an example - he pointed out that pension costs have risen more than 3000% since 2001, increasing from \$3million to over \$101 million today - Astorino maintained that the current system "is not sustainable" and spoke strongly in favor of giving more control over programs and their costs to local jurisdictions - counties, school districts and municipalities.

[Note that the newly enacted county budget includes a practice begun in the previous year of borrowing to fund pension costs, in order to keep the budget lower; this practice reportedly precipitated outgoing Westchester County Legislator Judy Myers to cast the only "no" vote.]

What about the outlook for the next four years? Astorino anticipates that the economy

will improve slowly, although he warns that early positive signs, like the recent increase in sales tax revenues, might just be a blip resulting from Hurricane Sandy relief efforts. And, although the county has been able to keep costs in check thus far, Astorino warned that we must remain vigilant lest expenses overtake the county's efforts.

The lively audience peppered him with questions about gun control, affordable housing, Playland, and other issues.

Gun Control. Regarding the issue of gun control and safety for children, Astorino did not express support of any particular legislation. Instead, he referenced the "Safer Communities" forum held by the county following Sandy Hook tragedy, which brought law enforcement officials, educators, clergy, elected officials and civic leaders together with representatives from the county's Public Safety, Health and Community Mental Health departments. Stressing the importance of dealing with the mental health system, Astorino said the county is working with schools to identify and help at-risk kids. Questioned about his decision to bring gun shows back to the Westchester County Center, Astorino defended his



County Executive Rob Astorino. Photo credit: John Gitlitz

position, citing much stricter regulations and protocols for the show which have since served as a model for gun shows elsewhere.

Affordable Housing. The audience had numerous questions about Astorino's controversial stance on the affordable housing settlement, an agreement which his predecessor, former County Executive Andrew Spano, and the Board of Legislators entered into with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in 2009 to settle a housing lawsuit against the county. The settlement requires Westchester County to build 750 affordable housing units costing a minimum of \$51 million by 2016; Astorino said the county is on target, with 399 units currently underway. Astorino and the HUD are at odds over certain of the aspects of the settlement; Astorino claims that the federal government "continues to make new claims not backed up by facts" and to add new requirements to what he considers to be a very open-ended agreement. In fact, Astorino maintained that it is so open-ended that "no matter what the county does, it can't succeed."

Members of the audience expressed frustration with the county stance, which threatens federal housing grant monies for Westchester municipalities. When asked "why can't we just

move on?" Astorino stated that he is "not going to admit to something we don't agree with" and that "just because the Federal government says it, doesn't mean it's true." He adamantly denied the existence of any exclusionary zoning in Westchester municipalities - the heart of the dispute with the federal government - and promised to continue protecting the county's rights and defending the municipalities accused of having exclusionary zoning.

Playland. Asked about the status of Playland, Astorino expressed hopes that the transition to private management would begin this spring, and that the handover would take place this fall. He reminded the audience that the goal has been to make Playland a year-round destination, thereby increasing attendance, and to have it run and managed by professionals. He acknowledged there are still areas of debate, including the size and scope of the sports zone and its impact on the reduction of the parking lot.

The Board of Legislators currently has a 90-day window to review the Playland Improvement Plan; it is anticipated that there will be a couple of public meetings held in Rye. Astorino expressed a desire to bring this lengthy planning process - begun in August 2010 - to a conclusion, and begin implementation shortly.

Other Issues:

- Asked about his views on **campaign finance reform**, Astorino said that he is not in favor of using public financing for campaigns (referencing the NY City model), as it "shifts the problem, it doesn't fix it."

- In terms of what the county can do to help "aging in place" organizations, Astorino referred to the county's "Livable Communities" initiative, which includes a "neighbors-helping-neighbors" program aimed at helping aging seniors remain in their homes. He reiterated his stance on holding down property taxes as being perhaps the most important way to help seniors stay in their homes.

- Astorino admitted that addressing flood issues remains a huge county-wide issue. While the county is doing what it can by working with communities to prioritize their needs, Astorino told the audience that the costs of flood mitigation initiatives are not affordable without aid.

The breakfast forum was hosted by The Larchmont/Mamaroneck Local Summit, an informal community council that seeks to make life better for all in the community. Its monthly public meetings are usually held at the Nautilus Diner in Mamaroneck at 7:45 a.m. on the third Tuesday of the month; however the February meeting will take place on Tuesday, February 11th.

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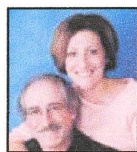
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Chair Jane Orans.

Keynote Speaker was Jonathan Rieder, Barnard College, Columbia University Professor of Sociology and Larchmont resident, discussing his new book *Gospel of Freedom, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that Changed a Nation*.

"I am going to paint a picture of the angry side of King, the angry prophet, not just the sunny dreamer," Rieder began. "Birmingham was a turning point in American Democracy. John F. Kennedy [initially] had no interest in a Civil Rights Bill.

"King's Birmingham letter became a 'slap

down' for white indifference and hypocrisy, stating, 'I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or Ku Klux Klan but the white moderate...more devoted to 'order' than to justice... For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!... This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'"

"His letter and protest spawned the Civil Rights Act which still reverberates out to gays, women, the disabled and prisoners, twin aspects of a revolution mobilizing the Black population and reaching out to white people," Rieder concluded.