

NASSAU-SUFFOLK SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

TESTIMONY

**MARY JO O'HAGAN, VICE PRESIDENT
NASSAU-SUFFOLK SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION**

NASSAU COUNTY LEGISLATURE

OCTOBER 18, 2010

**IN THE MATTER OF
ITEM # 591-10 (CE)
Proposal for Elimination of the County Guarantee
for Costs of Errors in its Assessment Procedures**

**Theodore Roosevelt Executive & Legislative Building
1550 Franklin Avenue
Mineola, N.Y.**

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Chairman Schmitt and Members of the Nassau County Legislature:

In what can only be described as a “stealth maneuver”, County Executive Edward Mangano moved to renege on his personal and public commitment to honor Nassau County’s long-standing obligation, commonly referred to as the “County Guarantee”. In so doing, he by-passed any communication with the governing authorities of the school districts upon which he seeks to unload his financial liabilities. He chose instead to promote his plan by spending County funds to attack schools and school board members.

It may come as a surprise to the County Executive and most likely to some in the County Legislature that duly elected boards of education are governance authorities on a par with that of the County. We are parallel levels of government, not subservient institutions.

As a representative of the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association, I am informing you that the governing bodies of Nassau’s school districts....the locally elected boards of education....have passed Resolutions opposing “any legislation, from whatever source, that would shift the responsibility of the County of Nassau for funding multi-year tax certiorari settlements of its assessment errors onto the local school district tax levy.” These Resolutions have been forwarded to each of you.

This spring the Boards of Education of this County faithfully adhered to their elected responsibility and forged budgets that protected the fiscal and educational integrity of their communities’ schools. In presenting on-time and balanced budgets to the voters, board members not only made many hard choices but exhibited the courage to deliver the unwelcome news of property tax increases. Those hard choices were validated and that courage was rewarded by the voters who approved every one of Nassau’s school budgets.

You were elected to serve the very same voters. Is there any reason for them to expect any less commitment or any less courage on the part of their County Legislators?

Faced with the enormity of the County’s self-created indebtedness, County Executive Mangano seeks to off-load the County’s obligations onto Nassau’s school districts and thereby claim for himself a “no property tax increase” budget.

Any assertion that abandonment of the County’s pledge, guarantee and obligation will result in “no property tax increase” is false and misleading. There is no cost avoidance, but merely a shift of the County’s lawful responsibility onto the schools within the County of Nassau. The monies the County would keep for itself under this deception would grow exponentially in local property tax impact when transferred to the schools’ far narrower revenue base.

County Executive Mangano has now called upon you to unilaterally, without the approval of the State of New York and/or the consent of the County’s school districts, relieve the County of its pledge, guarantee and lawful obligation to hold its school districts harmless for back payments of multi-year tax certiorari settlements, thereby shifting the costs of such payments onto local school property taxes and local school property taxpayers.

What is it to be? Will you exhibit the courage to face the County’s fiscal challenges without dishonoring its commitments? Or will you dodge your governance responsibilities by seeking to impose the County’s financial liabilities upon school districts and other levels of local government?

The County Executive has passed the responsibility for that decision on to you, the County Legislature. Inextricably linked to that decision will be accountability for its consequences. Let there be no doubt, it is you, our communities’ representatives to County government, who should and will be held accountable to the homeowners and local businesses that will have to foot the bill for the County Executive’s “no property tax increase” budget.