TOWN OF HUNTINGTON

Chambers Unite In Kickoff Meeting

Huntington's four chambers participate in countywide coalition's first gathering

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Half Hollow Hills photos/Danny Schrafel

Melville Chamber President Mike DeLuise, left, asks Suffolk County Economic Development Commissioner Yves Michel a question during Thursday's meeting. Melville Chamber Director Ted Macaluso and Chairman Mark Catapano joined DeLuise and nearly 80 representatives from dozens of Suffolk County chambers of commerce.

With nearly 80 representatives from more than 30 chambers of commerce in attendance – including all four of Huntington township's – Suffolk County opened for business a countywide coalition.

"Everyone seems to be extremely excited," Yves Michel, commissioner of Suffolk County's Department of Economic Development and Workforce Housing, said. "There were a lot of major concerns brought to the forefront."

County Executive Steve Levy said the new group could use that energy to share ideas and resources while using their power in numbers to influence lawmakers.

"We are energized by the interest this initiative has drawn from the Huntington and Northport chambers of commerce, as well as more than 30 other chambers from across the county," Levy said. "Together, we will strive to identify issues that could negatively impact businesses in Suffolk and to work cohesively to make New York increasingly business friendly."

"It's good that we got together," Melville Chamber of Commerce President Mike DeLuise added. "We're here to make the community better for all of us."

One of the things on DeLuise's wish list was to establish business-government partnerships to help streamline the process of starting a new business and building the infrastructure to attract and support them. He also hoped the coalition would connect chambers from around Suffolk County to share effective strategies and perspectives.

"We don't want [the county's] money – we want government to get rid of the obstacles that prevent us from making our own money," he said. "If they're serious, we can get a lot done."

Flemming Hansen, president of the Northport Chamber of Commerce, said the meeting was a particularly useful networking and educational opportunity.

"I kept a lot of phone numbers and notes," he said.

He called the chamber coalition a "good idea," but said it will need to find a focus or format, starting with several issues of universal concern, and begin seeking solutions for them. That model, Hansen argued, works well in the Northport Village Business Development Group.

"Health insurance – that might be an issue. Maybe pick two or three issues and make progress on a few issues," he said. "You can't try to please everybody… it will be too unwieldy. You're going to lose people's interest."

That seems to be the course of action the coalition is taking. Following the first meeting, Michel said the group is working on healthcare alternatives, strategies for filling empty storefronts, incentives to attract small business to downtown communities and networking opportunities.

The next meeting of the coalition, which will be divided into three regions – Brookhaven township, the towns to the east of Brookhaven and the towns to the west – is expected to be in about two months, Michel said. Once it is up and running, the larger group will meet quarterly and the regional committees once every 60 days.

The Department of Economic Development and Workforce Housing will remain in a leadership role for the coalition, but Michel stressed the true power is in the membership.

"This is really their group to help lobby for change," he said. "We're examining legislation that can promote small business, and also lobby against legislation that is prohibitive to small business."

DIX HILLS

Stern Blasts Funeral Protest Ruling

Despite 'appalling' decision, legislator confident picketing law remains constitutional

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A United States Supreme Court decision which stated that an anti-gay Kansas church and its picketing outside a soldier's funeral is constitutionally-protected speech is making waves in Huntington.

In an 8-1 decision authored by Chief Justice John Roberts, the court upheld an appellate court decision vacating a multimillion-dollar award for the family of Matthew Snyder, who was killed in Iraq in 2006. The family sued Westboro Baptist Church, of Topeka, Kansas, for intentional infliction of emotional distress after the church, led by Fred Phelps, picketed outside Matthew's funeral to argue the death of soldiers is holy retribution for American tolerance of sin and homosexuality.

"Westboro addressed matters of public import on public property, in a peaceful manner, in full compliance with the guidance of local officials. It did not disrupt Mathew Snyder's funeral, and its choice to picket at that time and place did not alter the nature of its speech," Roberts wrote. "Because this nation has chosen to protect even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that public debate is not stifled, Westboro must be shielded from tort liability for its picketing in this case."

The decision outraged Legislator Steve Stern (D-Dix Hills), who authored legislation last June to regulate protests near funerals when officials got word that the Phelps clan might be headed to Shelter Island to picket during the funeral of Lt. Joseph Theinert.

"Today's [March 2] decision… is absolutely appalling," he said. "While I appreciate the fundamental right to constitutionally protected speech, the protests by the Westboro Baptist Church are nothing more than 'fighting words,' which are not protected by the First Amendment… I would expect our nation's highest court to strike the balance in favor of personal privacy that would protect the dignity and honor of our fallen heroes."

As the lone dissenting voice on the court, Justice Samuel Alito argued the protests were not protected speech because Westboro targeted the Snyders for intentional infliction of emotional distress on an issue – Matthew's funeral – that was not a matter of public concern.

"Petitioner Albert Snyder is not a public figure. He is simply a parent whose son, Marine Lance Corporal Matthew Snyder, was killed in Iraq. Mr. Snyder wanted what is surely the right of any parent who experiences such an incalculable loss: to bury his son in peace. But respondents, members of the Westboro Baptist Church, deprived him of that elementary right," Alito wrote. "They first issued a press release and thus turned Matthew's funeral into a tumultuous media event. They then appeared at the church, approached as closely as they could without trespassing, and launched a malevolent verbal attack on Matthew and his family at a time of acute emotional vulnerability. As a result, Albert Snyder suffered severe and lasting emotional injury."

Legislator Jon Cooper (D-Huntington), the first openly gay elected official in Suffolk County, said he sees both sides of the argument.

"At some level, I'm proud we're defending rights guaranteed under Constitution," he said. "On another level, it's outrageous they're able to get away with this because they are targeting families and loved ones at a time when they're in anguish and most vulnerable."

However, Stern argued the legislation he authored remains legal. Stern's legislation requires protestors to stay 150 feet away from a funeral site one hour before, during and one hour following the service. They must also remain 300 feet away from a cemetery during a burial. Failure to do so is an unclassified misdemeanor punishable by a $1,000 fine and/or one year in prison.

"If a similar protest violated the law I wrote, our law would be upheld because in general, the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld reasonable time, space and manner provisions in the past," Stern said.

Westboro Baptist Church first gained international infamy after they protested outside Matthew Shepard's funeral in 1998 using signs containing anti-gay slurs. Their focus has shifted toward the funerals of American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years.

The best way to thwart them, Cooper argued, is to starve them of attention.

"What they want is publicity," he said. "It would drive them crazy if people stopped writing about them."