

Wantagh debuts St. Pat's parade

BY JESSE COBURN
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The scene outside Maureen Tredwell's Wantagh Avenue home was briefly out of the ordinary Sunday afternoon, with jiggling dance troupes, bagpipers and fire trucks bearing four-leaf clover stickers replacing the usual flow of traffic.

It was Wantagh's first-ever St. Patrick's Day parade, and Tredwell, a 30-year resident, was not going to miss it.

"They really got the town together," she said, as she watched roadside with her husband. "I hope they have it every year."

Organizers said the South Shore hamlet's inaugural Irish celebration brought thousands of onlookers out on the sunny, brisk afternoon, including those with and without Irish heritage.

"I'm Italian, but I support," said Susan Corvi of East Northport, who came to wave to a friend riding a motorcycle in the parade with other Knights of Columbus members. "I guess everyone is Irish today."

The route was awash in green — hats and pants, jackets, bow ties and bows, beads and the occasional wig. Green, white and orange balloons were tied to fences and utility poles.

For Josephine Foynes, Wantagh's parade meant an opportunity to watch her 15-year-old granddaughter perform with the rest of her dance troupe.

"The tradition is beautiful," said Foynes, who marched behind the group in a bright green jacket.

Foynes, who lives in Wantagh, is herself Irish, having emigrated from County Mayo



Carmine, an English bulldog, gets in the spirit of the parade.

to Queens in 1962.

"Everybody was leaving home," she said of the move.

The brief conversion of Wantagh Avenue into a pedestrian zone did cut into business at the BP gas station along the route, but cashier Shankha Prajapati didn't mind.

"It's nice," Prajapati said of the St. Patrick's Day parade — his first.

He livestreamed the event on his cellphone so his friends in Nepal, where he is from, could watch along.

Jeff Clark, president of the Irish American Society of Nassau, Suffolk and Queens, said Long Island has around 10 St. Patrick's Day parades.

Although it was the first such parade in Wantagh, organizer Cathy McGrory Powell said everything went according to plan, "even the weather."

Powell, president of the Wantagh Chamber of Commerce, said the event will become an annual tradition.

"It's a great day for a celebration," she said.



Officer Wendy Verlotte, Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone and Pastor Steven Mangum at Sunday services.

BELLONE PUSHES POLICE DIVERSITY

Campaign urges minorities to seek careers as cops

BY MICHAEL O'KEEFFE
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The congregation at The House of Judah, already driven into a joyous frenzy by a soulful band and the preaching of pastor Sylena Mangum, gave Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone a raucous welcome Sunday at the West Sayville church.

Bellone took the microphone from Mangum to deliver his pitch: County officials, he said, want young African-American men and women to join the Suffolk police department.

"I'm so proud of the police department," Bellone said, touting

the county's historically low crime rates, "but to me it's always about striving to be better, to be stronger. What can we do? The world around us is changing. How do we change to be stronger, to be better? For me, the best thing we can do to make the police department better, to make it stronger, is to make it more diverse."

Bellone's visit to The House of Judah was just one of the latest stops by police and county leaders to encourage members of Long Island's minority communities, long underrepresented on the Suffolk police department, to take the exam this spring to join the force.

"We need more people from communities of color taking the exam because that is the pathway to get on the force and I will tell you there is nothing that would give me greater pleasure than to swear in new police officers from this community, from The House of Judah," Bellone said to thun-

derous applause.

The visits to schools, churches and other institutions is part of a monthslong \$215,000 marketing campaign Bellone and Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart unveiled in November to encourage minorities to consider careers as cops. The campaign, led by Crown Advertising of Hauppauge, includes posts on social media, advertisements on buses and announcements in Spanish-language media, as well as visits to churches, schools and other institutions by police and county leaders. The department has also expanded its recruiting staff from one officer to four.

Both the Nassau and Suffolk police departments have been under federal monitoring, mandating the racial diversification of their ranks since the 1980s in response to allegations of discrimination.

Bellone's visit Friday to the Masjid Darul Quran in Bay



The Wantagh Pipe Band marches in the St. Patrick's Day parade.

Two vie for Suffolk's 9th Legislative seat

BY RICK BRAND
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Both contenders in the March 19 special election to fill Suffolk's 9th Legislative District seat once held by state Sen. Monica Martinez tout their past experience in arguing they have the best credentials for the job.

Democrat Sam Gonzalez points to his years as a labor leader — the last five as president of the 1,200-member IBEW Local 1430 in Westchester County — and his experience dealing with problems facing working people.

"I've been a union guy for more than 30 years," said Gonzalez, 57, of Brentwood. "The experience I have in negotiating contracts and improving peoples' salaries and working conditions will help me move the community forward."

Republican Maria Vidal, 49, a manager for the nonprofit advocacy group Pronto, says she has closer ties to the community due to her experience dealing with local problems. She also cites her background as a first-generation immigrant from El Salvador who came to the United States in 1988 to escape oppression.

"As an immigrant, I understand their situation and problems and I want to be their voice," said Vidal of North Bay Shore.

Tuesday's special election will fill the vacant seat in the 9th District, which includes North Bay Shore, Central Islip and Brentwood. It is one of two legislative districts in Suffolk where minority candidates have the best chance of winning seats.

Both campaigns said they expect light turnout — 5 percent to 10 percent — because of the timing of vote. The district has 20,954 registered Democrats, 4,511 Republicans and 8,967 voters who are not aligned with any political party.

Because of the lopsided Democratic enrollment, Republicans have put up their own candidate only once since 2003. That was in 2017, when Martinez defeated Republican Hugh King with nearly 81 percent of the vote.



DANIELLE FINKELSTEIN

SAM GONZALEZ (D)

Age: 57

Home: Brentwood

Education/career: Attended Boricua College; graduate of the New York State AFL-CIO/Cornell Union Leadership Institute at Cornell University; president of IBEW Local 1430 since 2014; 36-year labor organizer; candidate for Islip Town Board, 2018; Democratic primary candidate for state Assembly, 2012

Family: Married with two children



JAMES ESCHER

MARIA VIDAL (R)

Age: 49

Home: North Bay Shore

Education/career: Attended Suffolk County Community College; certification as a nursing assistant from Stony Brook University; program director for Pronto, a nonprofit group, since 2014

Family: Married with two children

But Andy Wittman, Vidal's campaign manager, said Vidal's personal story makes her a viable contender.

"This is not about Republican or Democrat," said Wittman. "Maria, as an immigrant, has the best ability to connect with the largest voting bloc of the district, which is 70 percent Hispanic — many of them from Central and South America," Wittman said.

Legis. Tom Cilmi (R-Bay Shore), minority caucus leader, said Vidal "is an incredibly special person and her story, which started in El Salvador, is heroic and inspiring. She . . . faced violence and hardship that really built in her a tremendous character."

Richard Schaffer, Suffolk Democratic chairman, said Gonzalez's "community roots, his involvement helping people and knowledge of the issues make him the superior candidate and a natural to replace Monica."

The challenge is to turn out the party's own supporters to vote, Schaffer said.

Both candidates say they want to fight for funds for downtown revitalization, improve local parks and programs for youth, deal with the illegal drug problem and combat

gangs such as MS-13.

"If we have programs in the schools, for kids, they won't be going on the street," said Gonzalez.

He said he also wants to improve enforcement so there's no more dumping like what occurred at the Roberto Clemente Park. In 2014, Suffolk officials discovered that more than 40,000 tons of contaminated construction debris had been illegally dumped on the park's soccer fields and in a drainage basin.

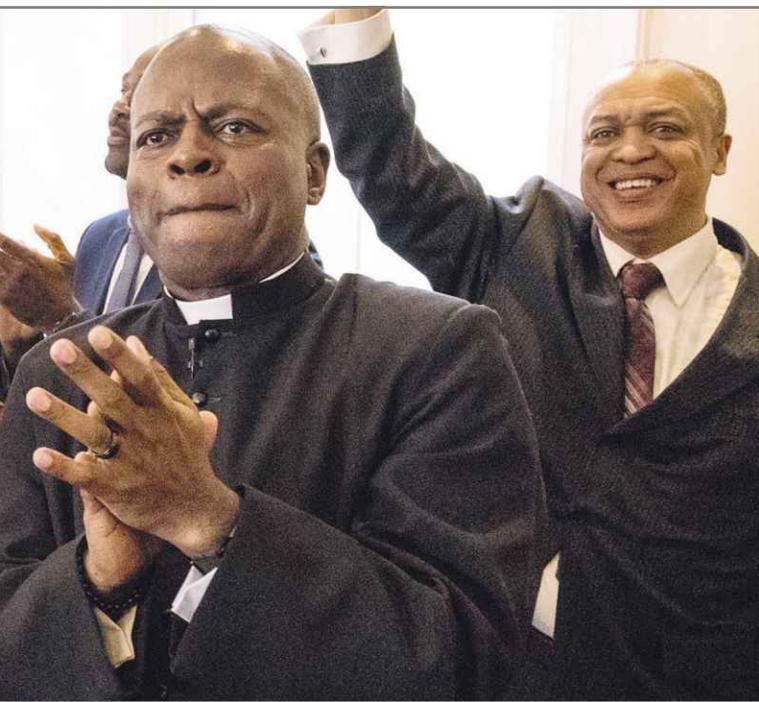
"I've got a big mouth — I don't consider myself a politician, but a public advocate," Gonzalez said.

Vidal said she wants to cut red tape to help speed up redevelopment of dilapidated housing and increase the number of bilingual police officers to improve community relations.

As of his 11-day pre-election campaign finance filing, Gonzalez had raised \$20,089 — not counting \$5,100 he returned to Heartland Town Square developer Gerald Wolkoff — and spent \$2,485.

Democrats in their last campaign finance filing also reported spending \$19,940 on Gonzalez's campaign.

Vidal has raised \$5,250 and spent \$3,851, Wittman said.



HEATHER WALSH

s at The House of Judah in West Sayville. ■ Video: newsday.com/suffolk



DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN

Bellone at Masjid Darul Quran, a mosque in Bay Shore, on Friday.

Shore, just a day after a self-avowed white supremacist killed 50 people at two mosques in New Zealand, was far more somber than the reception he received at The House of Judah. Bellone had planned on urging young people to take the SCPD exam. Instead, that message took a back seat to offering solace to the hundreds at the mosque reeling in grief.

Imam Muhammad Abdul Jabbar, however, said Bellone's original message was also important. Having more Muslims on the police force — officers who understand his community's faith and customs — would make him feel more comfortable with law enforcement. He said he encourages young members of his mosque to join. "You will be part of the solution," he said he tells them.

Sohail Ahmed, 18, of North Babylon, said he has always wanted to be a police officer

and had already applied to the Nassau department. He said he decided to take the Suffolk test after speaking at the mosque with Officer Andrew Tepper of the SCPD's Community Relations Bureau recruitment section.

"It would honestly be the best thing to be a role model in my community," he said.

Applications for the entrance exam are available at joinscpd.com. The application deadline is April 3 and the entrance exam is on June 15.

Suffolk community relations Officer Wendy Verlotte, surrounded by potential applicants and well-wishers after Sunday's services, said the affection she received at The House of Judah would be an asset to the department. "The fact is our people can make change in our community through service, and this is a community that is service-oriented," she said.