

Early STAR checks

Democratic areas got tax rebates before primary

BY MICHAEL GORMLEY
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ALBANY — STAR tax rebate checks to property owners were mailed far earlier than usual this year to New York City and eight counties in the state that traditionally have accounted for 74 percent of the Democratic vote in primary elections.

Election and tax records show the checks were sent in June, July and August to areas that included the five boroughs and Erie and Westchester counties. In Democratic primary elections such as the one held Sept. 13, those areas are traditionally the three highest sources of Democratic votes. There is not yet a breakdown of the Sept. 13 vote.

Until this year, the checks were sent in a “September to October” time frame and distribution took several weeks, according to the state tax department. This year, the checks to these top Democratic vote producers were mailed early enough so that the checks should have landed in homeowners’ hands well before the primary.

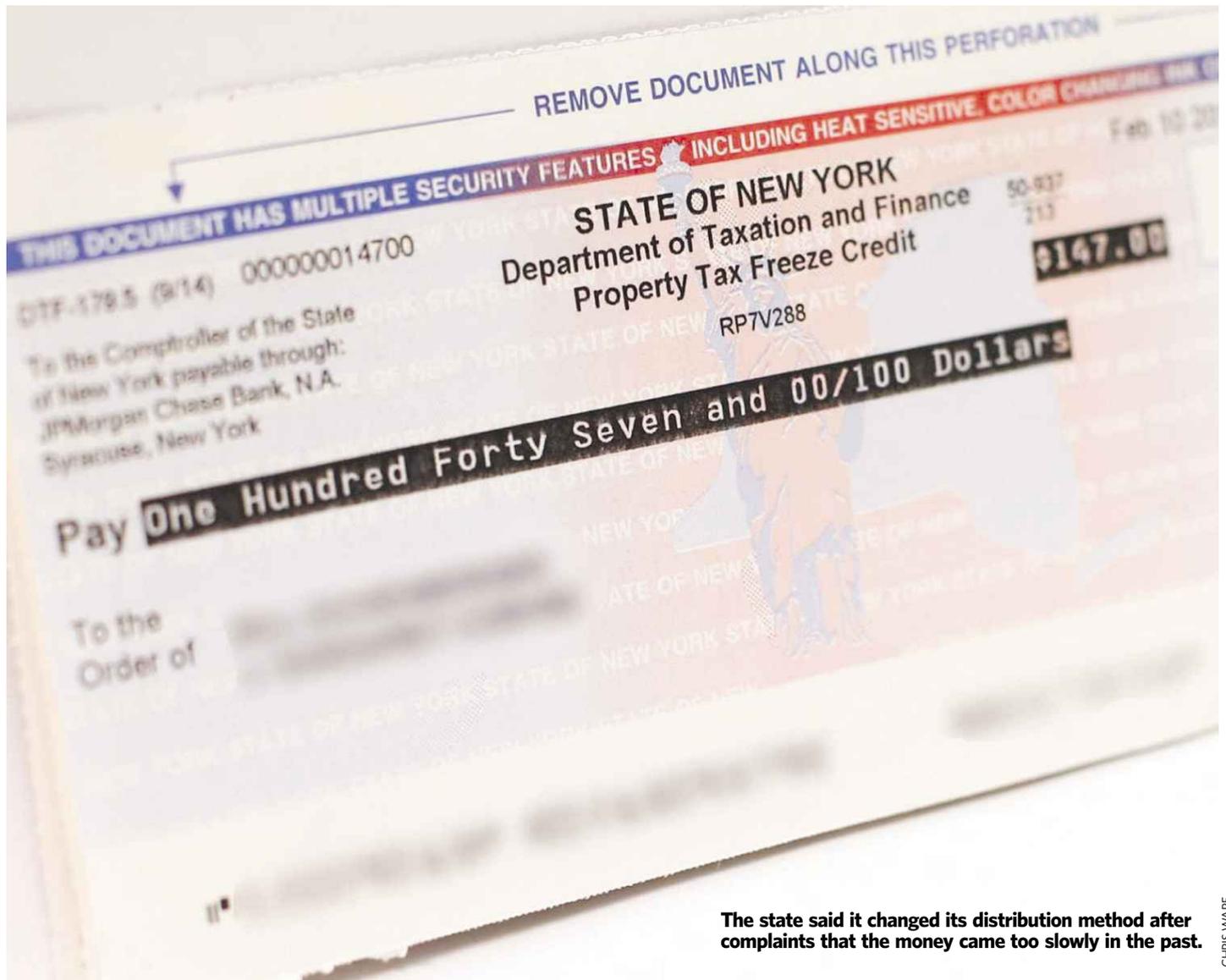
Staggering the dispersal of \$1.3 billion in cash means that some taxpayers will get their property tax rebates months after others.

Nassau and Suffolk later

In the case of Suffolk County, which was carried by Republican Donald Trump, the checks are scheduled to be mailed in mid-December, according to the state tax records.

In Nassau County, which was Democratic enough to be won by Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton in 2016, most checks are scheduled to be sent in early October. But it’s not uniform. For example, Glen Cove taxpayers, who faced school tax bills around Aug. 30, started receiving checks in early August, according to state tax records.

Most counties, primarily up-



The state said it changed its distribution method after complaints that the money came too slowly in the past.

CHRIS WARE

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state ones with large Republican enrollments, weren’t scheduled to start receiving checks until early September or mid-October. Most cities in the state, which have more Democratic voters than suburban and rural areas, received them earlier because, the state said, city school tax bills are often in-

cluded in city tax bills that operate on an earlier fiscal year.

Rich Azzopardi, spokesman for Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, dismissed any connection between the rebate checks worth hundreds of dollars to most recipients and the Democratic primary as a “conspiracy theory.” He said the distri-

bution was based on when school tax bills were due, noting that STAR stands for School Tax Relief.

He said changes in distribution were made this year because taxpayers had complained that the relief came too slowly and too late to be used when they were paying their school tax bills. Azzopardi said Cuomo’s name isn’t on the mailings.

“STAR was literally designed to help property taxpayers pay their school taxes and that is the schedule by which they are sent,” Azzopardi said. “Anyone spouting these silly conspiracy theories have clearly watched one too many episodes of ‘The X-Files.’”

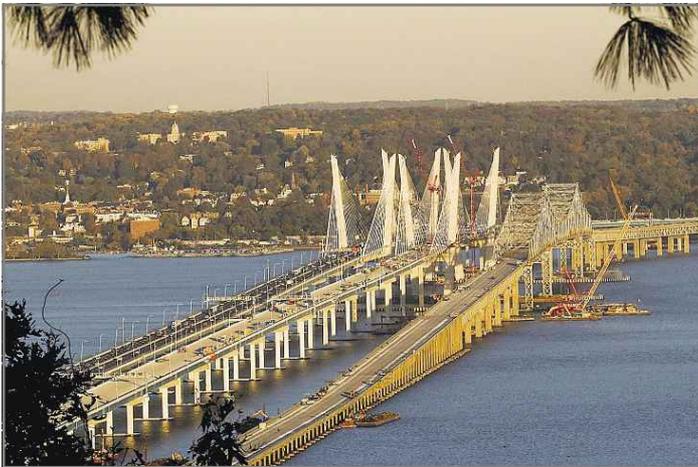
But Susan Lerner, executive director of Common Cause-NY, a good-government group, said the timing was worth questioning. “It is very unusual that from the prior two terms the STAR tax rebate checks were not in any way responsive to when taxpayers had to pay their local tax bills, but magically this year there is a sudden realization,” she said. “Now, perhaps it is a coincidence. But it does look odd and I think it’s perfectly appropriate to ask how this happens during the primary season.”

The state estimated the date school property tax bills are due by adding 30 days to the date that tax levies have to be finalized by local governments.

— for some



All five New York City boroughs got STAR checks this summer.



Westchester County started receiving checks in June.



Erie County started receiving checks by mid-July.

Using that measure, the municipalities — mostly cities — that received checks starting in the summer had earlier deadlines to pay school property taxes.

For example, in upstate's

Monroe County and Onondaga County, only the heavily Democratic cities — Rochester and Syracuse — received their checks beginning as early as mid-July. The rest of the coun-

ties, which include many towns controlled by Republicans, started receiving their checks in early September, according to state tax records.

James Gazzale, a spokesman for the Taxation and Finance Department, said checks were mailed as much as three months earlier than past years because the department has become more efficient in distributing the rebates.

He said that as of last Monday, the state had mailed out 215,000 STAR checks. More than 300,000 in total are scheduled to be mailed by the end of the year.

STAR checks had once gone to all qualified homeowners in the weeks before election days. That changed in part because good-government groups complained that incumbents of both parties were using money owed to voters to curry favor at the polls.

Who gets checks

Now checks go to anyone who meets income qualifications and who has bought a home since 2014. Homeowners who live in the house they purchased before 2014 now get a tax credit in their state income taxes, part of a law to streamline the process.

Azzopardi confirmed that New York City and the eight counties identified by Newsday started receiving their checks this summer. A chart he provided showed the checks began to be mailed as early as June 30 in Westchester and July 1 in New York City, which were battlegrounds for Cuomo and activist Cynthia Nixon in the Democratic primary.

Cuomo won the primary with 65 percent of the vote statewide to Nixon's 35 percent.

New York City Democrats traditionally account for 52 percent of the Democratic primary vote. Erie County, which traditionally provides the second most Democratic primary votes, with 9.6 percent of the statewide total, also started receiving its STAR checks by mid-July.

The third-biggest source of Democratic primary votes, Westchester County at 4.9 percent, started receiving STAR rebate checks in June.

\$500 fine eyed for fake passes

BY DENISE M. BONILLA
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The Town of Babylon is proposing to increase fines by \$400 for counterfeit beach passes after officials this summer noticed an uptick in the fake stickers.

While some of the town's beaches and marinas allow nonresidents by paying a daily fee ranging from \$20 to \$50, others allow only residents with passes. The passes, which cost \$45 this summer, are color-coded, laminated decals that must be affixed to a town resident's vehicle window. Babylon Town Parks Commissioner Celeste Kusmierski said beach and marina workers had seen a handful of fake passes every couple of years.

"It's a small but a persistent problem," she said.

This season, however, the number jumped to nine. And that's just those that were caught: A woman in West Islip reported finding "a bunch" of discarded fake Babylon passes on the side of the road, Kusmierski said.

The number of counterfeits is still minuscule compared with the total of more than 18,000 passes purchased this year, town spokesman Daniel

Schaefer said.

Still, Kusmierski said, taking advantage of improvements in technology, counterfeiters are getting more sophisticated and it's becoming a challenge to keep up. She said the town is considering adding a hologram or other unique component to the passes for next year.

"We're going to make it a lot harder for them to pull this off," she said.

Anyone caught without a pass or using a fake one is now issued a \$100 parking ticket, which can be fought through a court hearing.

The proposal would add a chapter on counterfeit beach passes to the town code's Uniform Code of Traffic Ordinances. The change targets those who "make, issue or use any imitation or counterfeit of an official" town beach pass or resident parking permit.

The current registrant of the vehicle will be the person held responsible for the infraction, the code states. Those accused will be issued a fine of \$500, which they can contest in Town Court.

The town will hold a public hearing on the proposal on Wednesday at 7 p.m. at Town Hall, 200 E. Sunrise Hwy., Lindenhurst.

COPS: BURGLARY RING BUSTED

Three men have been arrested in a five-month burglary ring of million-dollar homes, Nassau County police said Saturday.

The Nassau police Burglary Pattern Squad followed seven burglaries from May 12 through Tuesday in Old Westbury, Manhasset, Woodbury and Jericho. The homes that were burglarized range in value from \$1 million to more than \$5 million and their owners include several Long Island executives, according to property records.

The burglaries primarily occurred on Fridays and Saturdays between 8:30 and 9:30 p.m., with the last burglary recorded Tuesday night, police said. Four homes were struck on the same streets — two a week apart on Laurel Lane in

Old Westbury, and two homes two months apart on Stone Hill Drive in Manhasset.

The thieves stole jewelry, cash and other items by entering back doors or windows, police said.

Nassau police gave no additional details, but said the burglary team and the asset forfeiture intelligence unit used video surveillance and background checks. That led to the arrest of Brayan Castano, 30, and Andres Zapata, 20, both of Queens, who were charged with seven counts of second-degree burglary, and Oscar Vera, 27, of San Bernardino, California, who was charged in one burglary.

The three defendants were scheduled to be arraigned Sunday in First District Court in Hempstead. — JOHN ASBURY