

Pushback over hosting

Citing security, LI schools object to polling place use

BY SCOTT EIDLER

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Education officials on Long Island, citing concerns about security, are supporting legislation that would allow schools to opt out of their role as polling places, which political leaders and election officials say could depress voter turnout by creating logistical havoc.

School administrators long have objected to their status as hosts to political elections, when they must open their doors to throngs of voters and poll inspectors. Schools have no choice in the matter, even if their policy is to check visitors' IDs as they enter the grounds. As tax-exempt organizations, schools cannot challenge their assignments under state law.

Schools have spent large sums of money this year on safety measures aimed at restricting and controlling access to their buildings, following mass shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas. This fall, schools across Long Island have debuted or planned to add new security vestibules, perimeter fences, armed guards, and a requirement that visitors wear ID badges.

Election supervisors met with educators to hear their concerns, and discussed ways to block off portions of school grounds for voting in advance of the Sept. 13 primary and Nov. 6 general election.

Schools are ideally suited as polling places, with big parking lots and large gymnasiums and auditoriums, election administrators say. About 70 percent of polling sites in Nassau and Suffolk counties are school buildings. Other public buildings, such as firehouses, community centers and ambulance buildings, are generally much smaller, have fewer parking spaces and are less familiar to voters.

In Nassau County, John P. McKenna Elementary in Massapequa Park is the largest school polling site, with 9,505 registered voters. In Suffolk County, North-



Because of their tax-exempt status, schools cannot challenge polling place assignments under state law. Above, St. James' Mills Pond Elementary.

east Elementary School in Amityville is the largest school polling site, with 9,058 voters. There are 942,554 registered voters in Nassau and 954,150 in Suffolk.

Schools that host primary and general elections are undermining recent efforts aimed at bolstering school security, superintendents in both counties have argued.

Carle Place Superintendent David Flatley said many schools "are spending so much money trying to harden their schools, and then keeping them wide open on Election Day."

Rockville Centre Superintendent William Johnson called the conflict a "collision of values."

"We can't resolve it. We can't figure out how to have large numbers of voters come to our buildings and maintain a safe environment for our children," Johnson said.

Merrick Superintendent Dominick Palma detailed his dis-

trict's concerns in an Aug. 6 letter to Nassau's Democratic and Republican election commissioners, noting visitors must have a specific appointment to come in and discuss school business.

The letter came about a month before the Democratic gubernatorial primary on Sept. 13. A number of schools held classes that day, while schools are generally closed for the general election.

"The strictness of this rule has significantly increased in the face of each new tragic school shooting. Elections, by their nature, invite eligible voters to the polling site," Palma said in the letter, which was obtained under a Freedom of Information Law request. "This results in hundreds of unknown people on school grounds when students are outside for arrival, recess, physical education and dismissal."

Bonnie Garone, counsel to the Nassau County Board of Elec-

tions' Democratic commissioner, said election board officials have worked with school administrators to restrict voting to building areas "they feel comfortable with."

"It's not like voters can wander into areas where they will cross paths with students," Garone said.

A proposed state law sponsored by Sen. Elaine Phillips (R-Flower Hill), who is seeking re-election next month, would allow schools to challenge their designation, so long as they can prove they cannot adequately ensure safety during the administration of an election.

"There has got to be a way that school districts can legally work with the Board of Elections and find alternative sites," Phillips said.

State Sen. Todd Kaminsky (D-Long Beach) introduced a bill last year to require election officials to schedule polling at

alternative sites if school is in session and minors are present.

Garden City Superintendent Kusum Sinha, who supports the legislation, said, "It should be the school district's decision whether we deem it safe or not."

Sinha noted that, "People who come into our schools, they can't come in without being checked . . . But for polling, you don't have any of that. Anybody can come in."

Concerns about using schools as polling places grew in 2012 after the deadly mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, said Mineola Superintendent Michael Nagler, president of the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents.

"We've all put policies and procedures in place that drastically limit anyone from entering the school building during the school day, so an election completely contradicts that,"

elections



NEWSDAY / STEVE POST

Many schools require visitors to show ID to gain entrance to schools. New York State, in contrast, doesn't require voters to identify themselves at the polls. Above, the Wheatley School in Old Westbury.

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— Rockville Centre Superintendent William Johnson

Nagler said.

But Nicholas LaLota, Suffolk County Republican elections commissioner, noted that schools still host voting school board and district budgets in mid-May.

If districts had “moved their own elections out of their schools, it would have shown an increased level of sincerity about the argument that was being presented,” about other elections, he said.

LaLota said the Suffolk elections board “knows it's an unwanted tenant, but in order to provide logistics that can best accommodate nearly a million voters, we have to use schools. If we use fire department buildings, if we use ambulance district buildings, libraries, then voting lines will be hours long and parking nearly impossible.”

However, LaLota said, “If school districts are checking IDs in order to ensure their cam-

pus are secure, that seems like a reasonable deterrent to a nefarious member of the public trying to access a school building, and it's only a minor inconvenience to a voter.”

But Nassau Democratic Party chairman Jay Jacobs said, “Republicans want the use of ID to suppress mainly minority voters, and it makes it more difficult to vote.”

As for moving elections to other locations, “I don't think that anybody who wants to do harm in a school unfortunately has to wait until Election Day to get in,” Jacobs said. “I don't see that there is that much greater of a threat than exists in the 179 days that school is in session when there is no election.”

Unlike some states, New York does not require voters to show identification at the polls. Election workers generally compare voters' year-to-year signatures in poll books.

Climate change not a hoax, Trump says

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump is backing off his claim that climate change is a hoax but says he doesn't know if it's man-made and suggests that the climate will “change back again.”

In an interview with CBS' “60 Minutes” that aired Sunday night, Trump said he doesn't want to put the United States at a disadvantage in responding to climate change.

“I think something's happening. Something's changing and it'll change back again,” he said. “I don't think it's a hoax. I think there's probably a difference. But I don't know that it's man-made. I will say this: I don't want to give trillions and trillions of dollars. I don't want to lose millions and millions of jobs.”

Trump called climate change a hoax in November 2012 when he sent a tweet stating, “The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.” He later said he was joking about the Chinese connection, but in years since has continued to call global warming a hoax.

“I'm not denying climate change,” he said in the interview. “But it could very well go back. You know, we're talking about over a . . . millions of years.”

Temperature records kept by NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration show that the world hasn't had a cooler-than-average year since 1976 or a cooler-than-normal month since 1985.

Trump, who is scheduled on Monday to visit areas of Georgia and Florida damaged by Hurricane Michael, also expressed doubt over scientists' findings linking the changing climate to more powerful hurricanes.

“They say that we had hurricanes that were far worse than what we just had with Michael,” said Trump, who identified “they” as “people” after being pressed by “60 Minutes” correspondent Leslie Stahl. She asked, “What about the scientists who say it's worse than ever?” the president replied, “You'd have to show me the scientists because they have a very big political agenda.”



AP / ANDREW HARNIK

President Donald Trump told “60 Minutes” that he doesn't know if climate change is linked to man-made emissions.



AFP/GETTY IMAGES / JIM WATSON

Defense Secretary James Mattis, whom Trump called “a Democrat,” has said he'll stay.

Trump's comments came just days after a Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a warning that global warming would increase climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security and economic growth. The report detailed how Earth's weather, health and ecosystems would be in better shape if the world's leaders could somehow limit future human-caused warming.

Citing concerns about the pact's economic impact, Trump said in 2017 that the United States will leave the Paris climate accord. The agreement set voluntary greenhouse gas emission targets in an effort to lessen the impact of fossil fuels.

On a different topic, Trump told “60 Minutes” that he's been surprised by Washington being a tough, deceptive and divisive place, though some accuse the real estate mogul elected president of those same tactics. He said the political people in Washington have changed his thinking.

“This is the most deceptive, vicious world. It is vicious, it's full of lies, deceit and deception,” he said. “You make a deal with somebody and it's like making a deal with — that table.”

In the same interview, Trump said he has a “very good relationship” with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis even though he thinks the Pentagon chief is “sort of a Democrat.”

Asked Sunday whether Mattis will step down, Trump said Mattis hasn't told him that.

But Trump said: “It could be that he is. I think he's sort of a Democrat, if you want to know the truth. But Gen. Mattis is a good guy. We get along very well. He may leave. I mean, at some point, everybody leaves.”

Last month, Mattis dismissed news reports that tensions with Trump could soon point to his exit. One area of tension has reportedly been on the importance of NATO, the alliance of Western nations that was formed after World War II to help keep the peace.

Trump disputed reports that Mattis had said to him, “The reason for NATO and the reason for all these alliances is to prevent World War III.”

Trump told “60 Minutes”: “I think I know more about it than he does. And I know more about it from the standpoint of fairness, that I can tell you.”

EDITORIAL

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