

# Math error persisted in GOP funds

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An apparent math error from 2006 led Smithtown Republicans' leadership committee to overstate its finances in every filing since by roughly \$55,000, state and county officials said.

The committee entered a \$2,834.16 balance for July of that year in the account used for expenses such as rent and utilities, according to state Board of Elections records. The committee added \$26,500 from a fundraising account and should have subtracted \$27,497.77 in expenses.

That should have yielded a closing balance of \$1,836.39. But the committee recorded expenses as a negative number. By subtracting negative \$27,497.77, the Republicans actually added that amount, incorrectly inflating the closing balance for that reporting period to \$56,831.93.

The error was never corrected, providing a comfortable, if illusory, cushion as Smithtown Republicans took in and spent amounts in that account typically in the mid-five figures annually, according to records, yielding closing balances that ranged from a low of \$54,347.27 reported in 2007 to a high of \$71,535.54 in 2014. The last reported closing balance, in July, was \$67,378.66. In an interview Tuesday, Smithtown GOP chairman Bill Ellis said town Republicans have always accurately recorded "all the money that comes in and all the expenditures that go out" and abided by the state's finance reporting schedule.

He said, "There's no \$68,000 in any account." He said he knew nothing about the discrepancy with campaign finance records, which he said he does not review. "I don't know anything about that because I don't handle that," he said. "That's 12 years ago."

Any suggestion that he bears responsibility as the top Republican leader in the town is incorrect, he said. "I'm not responsible for anything, according to the election law," he said.

"I don't see any violation here," said John W. Conklin, director of public information for the state Board of Elections, though he said his agency's compliance unit likely will ask Republicans to amend their filings. "I think they entered a debit creating a double negative" for the July 2006 filing, he said.

Two changes to campaign finance reporting rules in 2006 may have contributed to the apparent error, he said. Committees switched from filing paper reports with county election boards to filing electronically with the state; the number of committees required to file with the state rose from 4,000 to 14,000. The campaign finance office at that time had a staff of just six. They checked filings in response to specific complaints, but didn't generally review them.

The filer, usually but not always the committee treasurer, verifies the filings as true and accurate, Conklin said.

Ellis said filings are examined by a certified public accountant, but he declined to identify that person.

Louis Necroto was the treasurer through April 2012. Charles Michaels is the current treasurer, Conklin said. Voting records show two Louis Necroto in the county, one who is a CPA and the county's chief deputy comptroller. Michaels and that Necroto did not respond to requests for comment.

Correcting the finance math by subtracting \$54,995.54 from the reported July balance yields \$12,383.12.

Ellis would not confirm that amount. "Our records are our records," he said.

While money from the Republicans' housekeeping account cannot legally be spent to promote specific candidates, Ellis' political rivals said its inflated balance may have influenced local candidates or those considering running for office.

Smithtown GOP controls town government and has elected lawmakers at the county, state and federal levels.



A view of the Fire Island breach in April. Waters along both north and south shores have been affected.

SCHOOL OF MARINE AND ATMOSPHERIC / CHARLES FLAGG

## Summer of health crises for LI's coastal waters

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The quality of Long Island's estuaries reached "crisis" levels this summer, with nitrogen-rich waterways afflicted by a combination of the most widespread rust tide algae blooms in recent memory and fishkills caused by oxygen-starved waters, environmental activists said Tuesday.

A new report, compiled by Christopher Gobler, professor at Stony Brook University's School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, which studied Long Island's coastal waters from May through September, found excessive nitrogen pollution was fueling an array of public health concerns.

"There's hardly a region across all of Long Island that has been immune to water quality impairment," Gobler said at a news conference at the Fire Island National Seashore Visitor's Center in Patchogue. "One could call it a crisis. And we would call it a crisis."

The problems, Gobler said, began in May with several paralytic shellfish poisoning events because of low oxygen levels in Shinnecock Bay on the East End and on the North Shore in Northport Harbor and Huntington Harbor.

The region also faced the most widespread rust tide bloom in Long Island history — stretching for the first time from the South Shore to the North Shore and on the East

End, resulting in the death of thousands of oysters and fish in Southampton.

And blue-green algae blooms were discovered in more than 20 lakes across Long Island, producing toxins that can harm both humans and animals, officials said. In 2017, Suffolk had more lakes with blue-green algae blooms than any other county in the state — a distinction expected to continue this year, the report said.

Each of the events, the report found, was fueled by nitrogen pollution, primarily from household sewage. Nearly 75 percent of Suffolk homes do not have a sewer system, and an estimated 252,000 homes use cesspools — holding tanks that eventually leach untreated waste directly into the ground. Another 108,000 properties have traditional septic systems, which, while offering better overall treatment, do little to reduce nitrogen.

"This is the greatest challenge Long Island faces for its sustainability," said Adrienne Esposito, executive director of Citizens Campaign for the Environment. "We have to meet this challenge to meet the long-term needs of the island."

But John Tanacredi, director of the Center for Environmental Research and Coastal Oceans Monitoring in West Sayville, argues many of the events described in the report are naturally occurring phenomenon and the threat of nitrogen from wastewater has been overblown.

"Blaming everything on septic systems is an overstatement," said Tanacredi, a professor of earth and environmental sciences at Molloy College in Rockville Centre. "This is not an ecological catastrophe."

While the state has committed \$2.5 billion to improve water quality with septic system rebates, sewer infrastructure upgrades and repairs, environmental advocates contend more money is needed from U.S. agencies.

"The investment from the federal government is entirely unsatisfactory," said Dick Amper, executive director of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society. "Our members of the House and Senate are not doing what they need to do. . . . It's a big missing piece."

Although the report showed serious concerns with most area waterways, there were signs of progress.

The Long Island Sound Report Card, released Monday by other environmental groups, showed that a decadeslong, \$2 billion effort to treat nitrogen at dozens of sewage treatment plants that discharge into the Sound had improved water quality. The report card said low-oxygen zones found in the Sound each summer were shrinking and fish die-offs were smaller and less frequent.

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