

Bellone offers end run to

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Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone on Tuesday unveiled a plan he thinks will help local homeowners avoid the new \$10,000 federal cap on deductions for state and local taxes.

But one state tax watchdog isn't sure it's legal and one key county legislator expressed strong concerns about spending heavy legal fees to fight for it in court.

The Bellone proposal centers on the idea of rebranding property tax payments as charitable contributions. His plan would permit homeowners, in lieu of paying property taxes, to pay an equivalent amount into a charitable fund, then claim those payments as charitable federal tax deductions.

It mirrors a proposal offered by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo — one that the Internal Revenue Service already has said is illegal and won't be approved. Bellone said he's submitting legislation to the County Legislature to establish the "Charitable Gift Trust Fund" and stands ready to challenge the IRS in court. He says it would make the first American county to do so.

"We will make clear to the IRS that we are serious about protecting families in Suffolk County, that we will do everything in our power to fight back against legislation that will hurt families and our economy," Bel-



Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone unveiled a plan for homeowners avoid the federal cap on deductions for state and local taxes.

lone said, according to prepared remarks announcing his initiative. "My message to the IRS is clear: If you try to stop us from protecting our SALT deductions, we will see you in court."

In 2017, President Donald Trump and a Republican-con-

trolled Congress overhauled the federal tax code. Among the changes, they capped the amount of deduction a taxpayer can take for state and local taxes at \$10,000. They also doubled the standard deduction, making it \$24,000 for married couples, which analysts

said would negate the impact of the SALT limit for many homeowners.

Leaders of high tax states — especially New York, New Jersey, California, Connecticut and Illinois — called the cap a political hit job on primarily Democratic states.

Cuomo, as well as several other governors, proposed a charitable deduction "work around" very similar to Bellone's. But in August 2018, U.S. Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said the IRS would prevent "attempts to convert tax payments into charitable

DA: Former bus driver, aides charged with

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A former school bus driver and two ex-bus aides abused an autistic 9-year-old child whom they took to and from a BOCES school in West Islip, Suffolk prosecutors said Tuesday.

The alleged mistreatment, which took place on the school bus on seven dates in October 2018, was captured on the bus surveillance camera, prosecutors said.

The three employees indicted Tuesday each worked for

Medford-based East End Bus Lines: driver James LaGreca, 81, of Medford; aide Auga M. Roberts, 68, of Coram; and aide Anneris Contreras, 56, of Bay Shore.

Prosecutors said that, on multiple occasions, Roberts, in the presence of Contreras and LaGreca, kicked the boy, a student at the Masera Learning Center who is nonverbal. On one occasion, Roberts bent the child's toes backward, causing him to cry out in pain, prosecutors said.

Roberts and Contreras also used the victim's hand to slap

himself in the face on several occasions, officials said.

"Visualize that for a moment — bending a child's toes back while he screams in pain," District Attorney Timothy Sini said at a news conference at the Suffolk County Court in Riverhead.

Each of the three defendants was arraigned Tuesday before County Court Judge Timothy Mazzei, charged with multiple counts of first-degree endangering the welfare of an incompetent or physically disabled person, a crime punishable by up to 1 1/3 to 4 years in prison.

Mazzei released the three on

their own recognizance.

The alleged abuse came to light, Sini said, when the boy's parent became suspicious that something had happened to him on the bus and contacted officials of the Longwood Central School District, where the boy is a student.

Longwood officials contacted bus company officials, who reviewed the video footage and discovered the alleged mistreatment, Sini said.

Attorneys for the three employees denied the charges.

"My client insists she did not do anything hurtful to the child

on that school bus," said James D'Angelo, the Central Islip-based attorney for Contreras. D'Angelo has requested a copy of the surveillance videos.

In one incident, prosecutors said, the boy threw his shoe at the bus driver, who responded by throwing the footwear back in the direction of the child.

James Vlahadamis of Hampton Bays, LaGreca's attorney, said he has not seen the surveillance footage. He said LaGreca helped raise a grandson who has special needs and has never been in trouble with the law.

"He feels horrible about this,"

tax cap

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— Steve Bellone

contributions.”

Although the IRS ruling hasn't formally been made final yet and Bellone is promising a legal fight, E.J. McMahon of the Empire Center, an anti-tax think tank, said Suffolk taxpayers should be skeptical of putting money into the proposed charitable fund.

“Any contribution to something like the Suffolk County fund is by no means guaranteed a tax deduction, so the message to taxpayers is don't count on it,” McMahon said in an email. He called Bellone's plan “nothing new — basically a Suffolk echo of Cuomo a year ago.”

Further, DuWayne Gregory, a Democrat and presiding offi-

cer of the County Legislature, said while he favors an offset of the SALT cap, the issue of the “work around” appears settled and he was leery about “getting involved in spending a lot of money” on a legal battle.

“The IRS said you can't do it, so I'm surprised. Unless there is some new guidance, I'm not sure we can” implement such a plan, Gregory said. “To me, it's a settled issue. But we can look at it.”

County Legis. Tom Cilmi, head of the Republican conference, called Bellone's proposal “another election-year charade.”

“It seems suspect that he's doing this after the governor tried it and after the IRS said you can't do it,” Cilmi said.

Bellone said the program would permit homeowners to make unrestricted contributions to the charitable fund and would be able to claim a credit against their property taxes up to 95 percent of the contribution. A business group applauded the county executive's proposal.

“As a region, we can remain idle and hope the loss of SALT will have little impact on our economy or we can proactively seek to mitigate the crippling economic effects on Long Island,” said Kyle Strober, executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, a developers' group.

abusing child, 9

Vlahadamis said.

Ira Rosenberg, the Central Islip-based attorney representing Roberts, did not respond to a request for comment.

All three defendants were terminated from the bus line in October, Sini said.

East End Bus Lines and the Masera Learning Center, which is part of Eastern Suffolk BOCES, declined to comment.

Julie Davis Lutz, chief operating officer of Eastern Suffolk BOCES, said in a statement, “We are truly disheartened to learn about the disturbing alle-

gations against an East End Bus Lines bus driver and two aides involving a student who attends our Masera Learning Center in West Islip.”

Davis Lutz said BOCES was notified of the allegations by the student's home district and has “fully cooperated” with law enforcement.

“Our thoughts are with the student and their family during this difficult time,” she said.

Roberts and LaGreca are due back in court March 27. Contreras is due back March 25.

ISLAMOPHOBIC POSTER DENOUNCED

Interfaith group: Image ties 9/11 to congresswoman

BY BART JONES
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An interfaith coalition came together Tuesday with politicians and community leaders to denounce a poster linking one of the first Muslim women elected to Congress with the September 2001 terrorist attacks.

More than 100 people gathered at the Islamic Center of Long Island in Westbury to criticize the poster of freshman Rep. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, whose image — wearing a hijab — was shown under a photo of a burning World Trade Center.

The poster was displayed Friday at the House of Delegates Chamber in West Virginia during an event sponsored by the state's Republican Party.

“They are connecting religious garb with the horrific crimes of 9/11,” Dr. Isma Chaudhry, chairwoman of the board of trustees of the Islamic Center, said Tuesday.

The event in Westbury was aimed at allowing community organizers “and the political leaders and the interfaith partners to stand with us to denounce Islamophobia and bigotry and anti-Semitism and hatred and reaffirm that we as one community stand against all these negative sentiments.”

Robert Socolof, Long Island director of the American Jewish Committee, said, “There is no place in America for that kind of fearmongering, Islamophobic attack.”

Town of North Hempstead Supervisor Judi Bosworth said it is “imperative that we not be silent when hateful incidences occur. Silence is a form of acquiescence, and history has taught us the consequences of silence when hate rears its ugly head.”



Imam Ibad Wali, director of the Hillside Islamic Center, speaks Tuesday at the Islamic Center of Long Island in Westbury.



Dr. Isma Chaudhry said of the poster involved, “They are connecting religious garb with the horrific crimes of 9/11.”

Besides Muslims, the event included Christians, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs, Chaudhry said.

The multifaith support “was quite heartwarming for us,” said Habeeb Ahmed, another leader of the Westbury mosque.

The poster in West Virginia had the words “ ‘Never forget’ — you said” above the photo of the Twin Towers, and the words, “I am the proof — you have forgotten” over the image of Omar, a refugee from Somalia who immigrated to the United States with her parents when she was young.

Some GOP leaders in West Virginia tried to distance themselves from the poster.

Omar, a Democrat, was re-

buked last month by both Democrats and conservatives after a tweet she made about the influence of pro-Israel lobbying groups.

Socolof said the American Jewish Committee condemned Omar's tweet, which some called anti-Semitic, but defended her right to free speech and religious freedom.

Chaudhry said she fears the poster incident “is going to bring in a new wave of Islamophobia and racism. It's become difficult [for Muslim women] to wear a headscarf, for them to go out.”

She added: “It is about time that Islamophobia is recognized as something that is . . . dividing our community.”

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