

LI GROUPS CALL FOR STUDY OF LIPA

Say review of public option not wide enough

BY MARK HARRINGTON
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A coalition of nine major Long Island business groups is pressing state legislators to broaden the mandate of a proposed panel to study a fully public LIPA to include the options of selling the utility to a private entity or keeping the existing operating model.

But the legislation's author is balking, calling the notion of a broader study "ill-considered" and "redundant."

Also, the Long Island Power Authority warned such a study could temporarily lock the agency out of the tax-exempt bond market.

Expected Assembly and Senate budget bills would provide \$2 million in appropriations to create a legislative commission to examine a fully public LIPA and plans to implement it by 2025, when PSEG Long Island's contract ends.

After PSEG failed to respond effectively to Tropical Storm Isaias in 2020, LIPA opted to negotiate a new contract that puts more of PSEG's pay at risk.

The contract also creates nearly 100 new performance metrics to measure the New Jersey contractor's progress.

Gov. Kathy Hochul's office said if the commission proposal passes both houses, she would consider including it in the new state budget.

The business groups, including the Association for a Better Long Island, the Long Island Association and the Long Island Builders Institute, said in addition to the fully public model,

the commission should explore continuation of the existing model of a private company operating the electric grid, and one in which the LIPA service area would be sold to a private company.

The coalition said the panel must study all three options for LIPA in order to "ensure that Long Island ratepayers don't fall victim to incomplete analysis, costing billions and negatively impacting the region's long-term economic viability."

State Assemb. Fred Thiele (I-Sag Harbor), who proposed the commission along with state Sen. Jim Gaughran (D-Northport), objected to the idea of the bill including a full study of privatization.

"There is no need for another full analysis of either privatization or the third-party manager model," Thiele told Newsday.

"Not only have they been reviewed many times, but we

have decades of real-life experience with both options," Thiele said.

Thiele said it's "only the municipal option that has never been given a fair chance."

Thiele said the legislative commission should evaluate other options only for comparison purposes, as is standard for such reviews.

Anything more extensive, he said, would be "ill-considered and redundant."

Previous studies by LIPA and the state have shown that selling off LIPA's assets to a private company would cost ratepayers money because LIPA no longer would be eligible for federal reimbursement for storm costs.

In a letter to the state bill's sponsors, LIPA chief executive Tom Falcone warned a study of privatization could have consequences including locking LIPA out of the tax-exempt bond market for the study's duration.

That's because LIPA, as a government entity, must disclose to potential bond buyers that the "facilities financed are expected to be used for governmental purposes throughout the term of the bonds," Falcone wrote.

A state evaluation of LIPA's sale to private entities "and the possibility that such a sale might be recommended would make such representations challenging," he said.

Falcone noted studies of privatization in 2005 and 2013 each locked LIPA out of the bond market for more than a year while the reviews were undertaken.

Kyle Strober, executive director of ABLI, which includes some of Long Island's largest developers, said he was aware of those findings, but conditions since then may have changed.

Strober also downplayed concern about bond offerings.

Hindus greet spring with vibrant colors

BY DANDAN ZOU
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The top of Sriha Vallapragada's long, white dress was covered with patches of green and splashes of pink dye, and streaks of orange, purple and blue decorated her face and hair.

The 13-year-old was one of the giggling children chasing and throwing brightly colored powder at each other Sunday in the parking lot of the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center of Long Island in Selden to celebrate Holi, a vibrant Hindu festival marking the arrival of spring.

"I feel free, like I could do whatever," said Vallapragada, of Nesconset, letting out a laugh when a little boy threw a handful of blue dye on her.

The event in Selden, which attracted about 80 people in the early afternoon, was one of several celebrations hosted on Long Island Sunday to mark the annual festival, which fell on Friday this year.

Celebrations typically start with a bonfire on the eve of

Holi, though the crowd in Selden lit the bonfire Sunday. During the day, celebrants applied colored powders on each other's cheeks and foreheads. Children ran around with water guns and directed streams of water at others. There was also food and music.

"The colors really are to brighten your life," said Lavanya Bhaskar, of Stony Brook, one of the event organizers. "It's also signifying spring. And so you know, once we're drawing out of winter, the whole purpose is to put that color in your life."

Bhaskar said she and her husband, along with a few other families, founded the temple in 2018 and hosted a small Holi celebration in 2019. The in-person event didn't return until this year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"In today's climate, [the festival's] gotten such a good meaning," said Shoba Menon, of Rocky Point, the temple's events chair. "There are so many issues, so many problems that you see in the world. So it's great to just think positive



Laasya Mada, left, 12, and Sameha Vundecode, also 12, celebrate Holi Sunday in Selden.

things . . . and send a positive message."

Holi is also known to be a day for new beginnings by forgiving and repairing relationships.

"The moral behind this holiday is forgive, forget and embrace your enemies," said Bina Sabapathy, president of the

India Association of Long Island. Her organization held a Holi celebration March 13 in Hicksville.

"When you throw the color, you feel so happy. You feel like you're a new person," she said. "If there's something in my mind I'm holding, I give up. I

say: 'New year, new time, whatever they did, I forget. I move on.'"

Tamanna Sandhu, 8, said her favorite part of the day was to throw the dye and see the reactions of others as they are drenched in a cloud of colored powder.