

RIVERHEAD TOWN

Supervisor lauds town's future despite COVID-19

BY JEAN-PAUL SALAMANCA
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Tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, stabilizing the town's finances and strengthening code enforcement are among the goals Riverhead Supervisor Yvette Aguiar laid out for the town this week in the first State of the Town address of her term.

Aguiar, who delivered the speech Monday at Town Hall, said her first year in office has been complicated by several challenges, including the ongoing pandemic and its economic impact on Riverhead. Despite setbacks, Aguiar said she and the town board had made "significant progress and achieved many accomplishments together" moving into 2021.

"I am optimistic our new normal will commence this summer, and I am confident we will tackle any future obstacles presented, and we will rise above this pandemic," Aguiar said. "We will re-

cover and emerge as a stronger, more unified community."

Among the accomplishments Aguiar's address highlighted was the town having "led the charge" in Suffolk County in allowing restaurant owners to create temporary outdoor dining and open at 50% capacity prior to Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's reopening plan.

Though Riverhead projected a \$1.8 million decrease in building application fees, state and county aid and Justice Court revenues due to the pandemic, Aguiar said the town mitigated such losses by cutting nonessential spending, placing holds on all promotions and limiting new hires. Lowering all town insurance policy premiums by \$30,326 and saving \$645,000 through renegotiating the Riverhead Town Police Superior Officers Association and Police Benevolent Association contracts enabled the town to cut its 2021 operating budget by 1.14%.

Aguiar said the COVID-19 outbreak "severely hindered" the town's ability to address overcrowded housing due to evictions and the prohibiting of tenant removals under the state's Safe Cares Act. However, the courts will commence issuing eviction orders after those restrictions expire May 31. Meanwhile, Riverhead will issue summonses to code violators while adjusting hours for code enforcement officers and adding another vehicle computer for efficiency, Aguiar said.

Looking ahead, Aguiar said the town plans to bolster its law enforcement presence by hiring 10 police officers.

In addition, the town anticipates the approval and completion of several Community Benefits Agreements would go to-



Supervisor Yvette Aguiar delivers her State of the Town address on Monday.

ward creating more open space, funding training for the town's four fire districts and ambulance corps, and creating study areas for Riverhead Students lacking Wi-Fi access at home for virtual learning.

Experts: Vigilance is key to halting spread of the virus

BY JOHN VALENTI
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The sad truth when it comes to the battle against the coronavirus, experts say, is that the pandemic will likely get worse again before it gets better.

Speakers on the latest NewsdayLive webinar, "Health & COVID-19: What Do We Know About Variants?" said Thursday that the fear is new variants will soon be driving an increased rate of spread.

But vaccinations and building herd immunity against the coronavirus remains the goal to winning the war. And in the meantime, vigilance remains key.

Vigilance, they stressed, in wearing masks, social distancing practices, and good hygiene protocols — even vigilance in remaining vigilant.

Calling the battle "a war against time," panelist Dr. Alan Bulbin, director of St. Francis Hospital's division of infectious diseases and antimicrobial stewardship, said the ultimate goal is to build "immunity in enough people," meaning herd immunity, in an effort to ultimately limit the spread of all strains of coronavirus — and to limit the severity of the illness in those who do contract it.

If we can reach that goal, he said, COVID-19 and its variants would become more like the seasonal flu: still a concern, but not something resulting in pandemic.

Dr. David Hirschwerk, attending infectious diseases interim chair of medicine at the Donald & Barbara Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra University / Northwell Health, said that is the very reason "it remains important we continue to adhere



to strategies" of masking, distancing and safe practices and why it's important you get vaccinated as soon as possible.

He said while there remains a slight chance vaccination won't prevent you from getting sick or even spreading COVID and its variants, those practices will reduce the severity of how sick you might get — and help limit any spread.

The issue with the new variants, both doctors agreed, is that they appear in the range of from 40% to 50% more easily spread than the initial strain of COVID-19, due to how the viral variants attach themselves to cells in your body.

In lay terms, Bulbin said, the new variants are "stickier" and that means the spread is more efficient.

As a result, Hirschwerk said, the Centers for Disease Control has suggested a how we mask. He said the new goal isn't to double-mask with surgical-type masks but to always wear one as tightly sealed as possible over your nose and mouth. Hirschwerk said, it makes for "a harder barrier to cross" for the virus and, in turn, helps limit spread.

The panelists said the U.K. variant has already been discovered on Long Island and that while the three known variants have so far shown themselves to have differences in how they work and spread, the underlying virus remains largely the same. Which is why getting vaccinated as soon as possible, even if you've already had the coronavirus, remains key.

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