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Long Island Envirothon unleashes power of new generation

April 29, 1:23 PM Long Island Populist Examiner Karen Rubin



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NC Envirothon champs: Chamonide's Tim Healy, James Agolia, Andrew Koche, Sean Dvorak, Danny Ebanks. (c) 2010 Karen Rubin/news-photos-features.com

As an oil spill the size of Ohio continues to threaten estuaries, fishing areas, tourism surrounding the Gulf Coast, the efforts of 36 Nassau and Suffolk County high school teams from 21 schools competing in the Long Island Regional Envirothon seemed all the more important.

Their work was hardly an academic exercise that ended in the course of an afternoon with the awarding of prizes. The months of preparation, investigation, learning will have lasting impact on the 225 Long Island students. Many go on to pursue environmental management in their college work and their careers, but even at the most

basic level, the knowledge and experience affects their perspective. they are more apt to raise consciousness and incorporate environmentally holistic solutions in their homes, their schools, their communities.

With so much depressing news all around, I seek out events like the Long Island Regional Envirothon for a dose of optimism that is reignited when you get to see the quality, the intelligence, the spirit of our young people.

The 12th Annual Long Island Regional Envirothon, a local component of the 2010 New York State and Canon Envirothon, is one of North America's largest environmental education competitions with over \$50,000 in college scholarships and other prizes. It was held this year at the Usdan Center for Creative and Performing Arts, Wheatley Heights.

The winners of this year's event, Chaminade High School, Mineola, Team #1, for Nassau County, and Sachem North High School for Suffolk County, received scholarships, product gifts and paid registration and transportation to compete in the New York State Envirothon in June; the winner of the state competition will go on to compete in the national Envirothon, to be held this year in Fresno, California, in August.

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Known as the Environmental Olympics, the Long Island Envirothon carefully develops the program's learning objectives to advance the level of understanding about the natural surroundings as well as to educate students about environmental conservation and promote sustainable development. Both the Nassau and Suffolk County Soil & Water Conservation Districts coordinate the Long Island Regional Envirothon in collaboration with the United States Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the New York State department of Environmental Conservation.

The focus of the 2010 competition was the "Protection of Groundwater through Urban, Agricultural and Environmental Planning". The more than 35 teams rotated among the various stations - Aquatics (they are given a microscope and a sample of pond water), Current Issue, Forestry (they tag a tree and analyze such things as the type. insects), Soils (they dig a soil pit and have to identify layers, slope), Wildlife (they are given pelts, bird calls and so forth) - and answering in-depth questions, but the climax is an Oral Presentation, in which the teams solve the given problem, giving a 10-minute presentation to a panel of judges who are experts in their field.

Like a mock trial, the students were given a set of facts and then the freedom to devise the solution which involves devising up with a comprehensive (holistic) plan to meet the development needs of a community, while mitigating the negative impacts and maximizing the positive impacts on the environment (check out the scenario, it is fascinating: http://www.lienvirothon.org/pdf/2010_Current_Issue.pdf).

What I gathered from listening to Chamonide's winning presentation was that a Nanotechnology factory was going to be built in a fairly rural area, bringing 2500 jobs, but with it, thousands more people, significantly altering the land use. Houses, roads, schools, sewage systems had to be developed, disturbing the existing environment which was adjacent to legally protected wetlands. I was fascinated as Chamonide introduced ecotourism as a source of revenue for the burgeoning town to use to meet some of these developmental challenges. They quantified and calculated the carbon footprint as well as the dollars and cents of the various strategies, seeing the give-and-take.

Tim Healy, a senior now at Chamonide, was on the high school's first team as a freshman, and last year, his team went on to win third place in New York State. He is now headed to Cornell University, where he plans to major in biology and become a teacher.

The collective environmental consciousness of these young people is significant as the United States faces a crucial juncture. Climate change/clean energy legislation languishes in the U.S. Senate, now a pawn in partisan struggles over matters as far-flung as financial regulation reform and immigration reform. These students - and their families - will hopefully have a greater appreciation for the impact, and see how environmental issues of land use, water supply, waste treatment, energy production and delivery directly impact their future - including prospects for future jobs, future industries, future communities.

"This foments their interest in environmental management," says Sharon Frost of the LI Envirothon.org. "They understand you can have a positive effect on environment."

A company like [Canon USA](#), which is headquartered at Lake Success, is to be lauded for their stalwart sponsorship of the LI Envirothon, as well as their other activities including their work with the Arbor Day Foundation, their efforts protecting Yellowstone National Park, and their "Green Team," instilling green-practices at work and home among their employees. In fact, it seems that more companies, like General Electric, and Duke Energy, would be doing more if there were national standards and requirements, and if carbon were priced in relation to its actual cost on communities (the essence of the cap-and-trade strategy), so that alternative, renewable and clean energy strategies could compete.

What is the cost of the U.S. Coast Guard and military coming to the aid of British Petroleum which leased the off-shore drilling station that blew up, spewing 5,000 gallons of crude oil a day and making an oil slick the size of Ohio? Who will pay? apparently, we will and in so very many ways, including higher food prices and higher gasoline prices.

Already, the environmental damage of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill is being reflected in rising gasoline prices - only bolstering the already obscene profits of the likes of Exxon-Mobil (which pays no taxes to the federal government - ironic, isn't it?), and further cutting into the meager resources of middle class/working class families. Doesn't that infuriate people? they are in a no-lose situation, and we all pay for it, through the nose. And yet, the only "new" development we have had in a national energy policy is to remove restrictions to new drilling offshore.

But there is some good news: the U.S. government to approve a wind farm off of Cape Cod, which is being hailed by the Long Island Power Authority, which has a plan of its own to build a wind farm off

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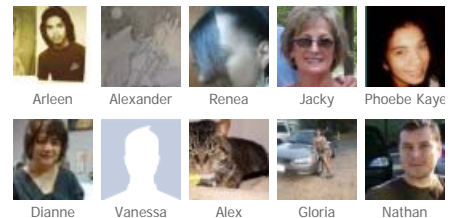


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of the South Shore.

"I commend U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and the Obama administration for their commitment to wind power as demonstrated today by approving plans to move forward with the first offshore wind farm in the country," stated Long Island Power Authority President and CEO Kevin S. Law. "Today's ground breaking decision is consistent with our ongoing discussions with federal and state agencies and the collaboration between LIPA, Con Edison and NYPA and will have positive ramifications in moving forward with the LI-NYC Offshore Wind Project.

"This project should create smoother sails for the off shore wind industry, help to secure our energy future and pave the way for a cleaner and greener nation while helping to stimulate the economy with high quality clean energy jobs."

The [New York Power Authority](#) also was a sponsor of the Long Island Regional Envirothon, and used the forum to promote its efforts in the areas of solar, wind and renewable energy sources. NYPA is helping to build 100 megawatts of solar power at New York schools ,businesses and government buildings, with a 50 percent solar subsidiary for customers served by municipal utilities or rural cooperatives investing in photovoltaics, and partnering with MTA for 6 mw of solar capacity. NYPA is also supporting efforts to develop wind power potential of the Great Lakes and off the coast of Long Island and working to provide the growing number of upstate wind farms with access to the state's transmission network.

There are local efforts, as well: the [Town of North Hempstead](#) just launched Long Island's first composting cooperative. For a small fee, any resident who wishes to participate will be given a composter and instructions. Composting is an excellent benefit to the environment by keeping bio-degradable trash out of our landfills and instead placed directly into our soil for organic fertilizer.

This is an excellent example of things, big and small, that can have significant impact on the environment.

But the Town of North Hempstead, which is in the process of negotiating a new 10-year solid waste management contract ([Covanta](#), a sponsor of the LI Envirothon, which does turn waste into energy, was in the running), should give heed to two op-ed pieces in the New York Times, talking about the "Power From Trash", and also the potential to turn human waste into energy.

"New York should try to reduce the amount of waste its citizens produce — for example, by imposing a fee for collection of waste but not recyclables. Much of what remains could be recycled or composted; these are the most cost-effective and environmentally benign ways to deal with waste. But they cannot handle everything that people throw out," state Norman Steisel and Benjamin Miller.

"The fraction of New York's garbage that requires disposal should be processed in waste-to-energy plants — which not only produce energy but are also cheaper and less polluting than landfills. ...If all of the city's nonrecycled waste were sent to local energy recovery facilities instead of distant landfills, the city would save diesel fuel and generate enough energy to supply 145,000 homes — thus avoiding the combustion of nearly three million barrels of oil to generate electricity."

That's just New York City... Long Island can do the same in building waste-to-energy plants rather than trucking waste to other states.

Also, instead of turning back garbage trucks loaded with waste oil from its sewage treatment plants on the South Shore, Nassau County should be turning that material into biodiesel to power trucks and buses, as [Great Neck's Water Pollution Control District](#) is doing, locally, generating enough power for its administration building and even supplying some fuel to the town of North Hempstead and other local governments.


More radically, in a companion [op-ed in the New York Times](#), [Rose George](#) also points to the unexploited potential of harnessing the energy of human waste, something that has been done in England since 1860.

Again, the Great Neck Water Pollution Control District wanted to do something on that order, taking advantage of the anaerobic digestion process (whereby bacteria munch on the organic contents) which produces methane, which with turbines can become combined heat or power. Microbial fuel cells can use bacteria to get electricity from sewage, while gasification, a high-temperature process, can reap fuel-ready gas from sludge. (That part of the GNWPCD's plan may have been ditched in order to get the cost down for rebuilding its sewage treatment plant).


Why haven't these things happened? Steisel and Miller cite "the lack of political will." Well, part of the issue of "political will" is also bound up with "financial regulatory reform: - where the biggest brokers


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in our country make their money - and financial regulatory reform is in itself bound up with campaign finance reform - the wealth versus commonwealth competition. There are vested interests in the status quo, and the power to preserve it.

The entrenched interests seem determined to keep us in a status quo that isn't really a status quo - it is destructive and only getting worse. The economics of the so-called "status quo" no longer work; the health implications of dependency on fossil fuels - as the burning of the oil slick in the Gulf of Mexico demonstrates - as well as the danger as the recent coal mine disasters in West Virginia and Kentucky have demonstrated (and now they want to spend hundreds of billions of taxpayer-guaranteed money on nuclear?????) show that as a society, we need to be focused more on wind, solar, geothermal and other clean, renewable sources of energy.

Changing that political will and opening the possibilities to such strategies as waste to energy - that's where such enterprises as the Long Island Envirothon come in.

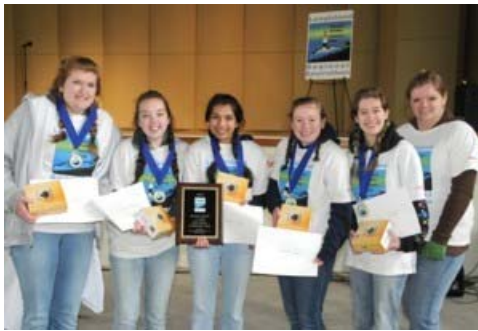
These students understand, and they are even voting age. And they will be graduating college and looking for jobs - hopefully in environmental management and new clean-energy industries.

Clean, renewable energy should be the dot-com, the Internet of the 2010s. It should have been the dot-come of the 'oughts.

For more information, visit www.LIEnvirothon.org or www.envirothon.org.

Karen Rubin, Long Island Populist Examiner

LI Envirothon harnesses power of next generation leaders



The Long Island Regional Envirothon brought together 36 high school teams from 21 schools, providing an opportunity to see environmental issues in a holistic way.

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