

Stewards of the habitat

14-member team from NYS Marine Education Assoc. gets knee-deep in plants in the Gulf of Mexico



Photo from Paul Focazio/NYSMA

Caitlin Reilly and Larissa Graham prepare plants for planting in the Gulf.

BY ELANA GLOWATZ
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After spending four days in Louisiana, Larissa Graham said she realized last summer's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is only one of the problems the area is facing.

The outreach coordinator with the New York Sea Grant's Long Island Sound Study went down South on a trip that was "initially set up to help with the impacts of the oil spill." NYSMA, a joint program of the State University of New York and Cornell University, has an office in the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences at Stony Brook University.

Although the total effect of this latest disaster on the ecosystem is not yet known, Graham said, people in Southeastern Louisiana are also struggling with wetland loss due to the longtime damming and channelization of the Mississippi River. And the effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are still an issue.

Graham was one of 14 members of the New York State Marine Education Association who made the journey in late February. The group of mostly Long Islanders first met with members of the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program next to the mouth of the Mississippi River. Graham said the members' "passion and excitement was just totally contagious."

One of the projects NYSMA worked on with BTNEP was on an island built of dredged soil called "The Ridge," off the coast of Port Fourchon. Graham and the others planted 800 shrubs to further the goal of turning this island into a maritime forest, with the hope "it will be a great habitat for migrating birds" that can land there for food and shelter. Graham said there were a lot of gnats in this area so although the temperature was in the 80s, everyone had to wear long pants and sleeves and nets over their heads that made them look like beekeepers in order to avoid getting bitten.

Later, the group met with Caitlin Reilly of

the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center and went to a nursery in City Park in New Orleans. Reilly, an extension associate for the LSU AgCenter who grew up in New York, said the NYSMA members worked with middle school students from a nearby parish to propagate *Spartina alterniflora* — wetland grasses — separating root bulbs on the plants and repotting them.

Graham said she was familiar with the wetland plant at City Park. *Spartina alterniflora* exists on Long Island, but due to a longer growing season in Louisiana, the plants were "three times the size of ours here." She also said wetlands are important because "they provide a habitat for a lot of different wildlife and are the "breeding grounds for different fish and animals."

Although this type of restoration work at City Park is on a smaller scale than the erosion and wetland loss the area is dealing with, Reilly said, a goal of the program is education. NYSMA members "really came informed and then asked really good questions," and will hopefully take what they learned "back to the community" on Long Island, she said.

NYSMA President Meghan Marrero said one of the ways her group will spread the word is through a webinar, during which people across the country will be learning about the problems the region faces and what they did to help. Marrero, who was on the trip, said, "For me, the biggest thing that I learned was that the area is still reeling from Hurricane Katrina and Rita," even though the devastation is not something at top of mind anymore for most.

Graham had been to New Orleans in 2006, she said, after Hurricane Katrina, and "got a handle on the social impacts" of the storm. On this latest trip, she saw things from another angle — the environmental side of the story. She said she plans to educate locals about the problems in Louisiana and "encourage them to kind of be stewards of our own habitats up here."

School board discusses tax levy increase, cuts

BY SUSAN RISOLI
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Emotions intensified at the Three Village school board meeting on Tuesday as residents, board members and administration debated possible cuts in the 2011-12 school budget.

As they try to close a \$9.7 million revenue gap, there are "no sacred cows," Trustee Glen Whitney said. But he urged the group to ensure Three Village doesn't become "another generic, faceless district" as a result of programmatic or staffing downsizing.

The budget is "a dynamic situation" that's "changing every day," interim Superintendent Neil Lederer said. Factors shaping the potential outcome include passage of the state budget — as it stands now, state aid to Three Village would decrease by \$1.4 million next year — and negotiations with the district's bargaining units. Parent Colleen Liebowitz asked for "specific numbers" on how union givebacks would lower expenditures, saying, "Not having any information is very frustrating."

Lederer responded, "You can't negotiate in public ... be assured, we are discussing these things."

The application of the fund balance and allocated reserves to the revenue gap is also possible, members of the board said. That is a viable approach, said Jeffrey Carlson, assistant superintendent for business services. But he warned against relying on it because "that money would just run out. But used with a plan to replenish it, that would be OK."

Though the board and administration emphasized that budget discussions are far from final, other potential reductions and their impacts were examined. Among them were changes in class size, the Intellectually Gifted and Academic Intervention Services programs, health education, athletic trainers in the high school, theatre arts and the services of a public relations firm employed by the district. As reductions were brought to the table, groans, murmurs and occasional applause were heard from the audience.

When talk turned to possible elimination of librarians and library staff, Trustee Diane Peritore asked, "What, are we just going to lock the doors and not have our kids use the libraries?"

Cheryl Pedisich, assistant superintendent for educational and pupil personnel services, replied, "These are just recommendations."

Peritore answered, "Mine are just suggestions."

A savings of \$100,000 could be achieved by trimming the number of posts covered and hours worked by district security guards, said Carlson. Board President John Diviney called

that figure "absurdly low," saying, "Let's first start out with the private army that is at Ward Melville ... that's just a group that's keeping their fiefdom together." Another \$400,000 could be saved, Diviney said, by "grossly cutting" high school security while keeping elementary and junior high security as is.

At meeting's end, Trustee Whitney paid tribute to a long-gone budget casualty with "a little shout-out to the district's marine biology program at West Meadow Beach." He paused, then said, "Oh wait — that was cut a number of years ago."

At their meeting on Tuesday, March 8, the school board considered modifying the previously-stated goal of a 3 percent tax levy increase.

In response to Lederer's call for flexibility in establishing a tax levy, Diviney said the 3 percent figure is not a "hard goal," adding he hoped the tax would not be raised above 4 percent.

Reminding the board of tough financial times faced by many Three Village residents, Peritore called for a tax levy "as close to 3 as possible. People are hurting out there and we have to keep that in mind."

More public workshops on the budget development process are set for March 22 and 29. A public budget hearing is scheduled for May 10.

Other money-savings avenues

The board explored the fate of mostly-unused property owned by the district. The building and five acres of land at 200 Nicolls Road used to house administrative offices before they were consolidated at the district's North Country Administration Building on Suffolk Avenue. Now the building is used for meetings, administering state tests to students and storing records. Although the current plan is to rent the property, Peritore wondered if the building could be sold rather than rented. Several board members disagreed due to concerns about the ailing real estate market. A motion to retain a real estate firm was tabled, when Diviney called for a future board meeting to include presentations by the three real estate companies under consideration.

The district received a \$197,500 rebate from the Long Island Power Authority for installing energy-efficient lighting fixtures throughout the district.

The search for an assistant superintendent for human resources has been unsuccessful and was extended. The board voted unanimously to extend interim Assistant Superintendent Edward Sallie's service in that position.