

ISLANDWIDE

Permit process change eyed

LI coalition wants to speed things up but union cites concerns over safety

BY MARK HARRINGTON
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A coalition of local officials, solar power companies and developers' groups is backing proposed legislation to allow state-licensed engineers and architects to self-certify construction projects, a change they say will speed up the building permit process and reignite the COVID-hobbled construction industry.

But the Civil Service Employees Association, a municipal employees union that represents thousands of workers across the state, opposes the idea, saying safety could be compromised if the normal government process of issuing building permits is delegated to the project contractors.

"The primary responsibility of the municipal workers currently overseeing this work is to ensure the safety of building projects," said CSEA spokesman Mark Kotzin. "Unfortunately, developers may have other motives, and allowing them to self-certify with only random municipal audits could lead to safety problems."

Backers of the two bills point to successful self-certification permitting programs in New York City as an example that they work and don't compromise safety. They say passage of the bills could shave weeks or more from the two weeks to several months it takes some local

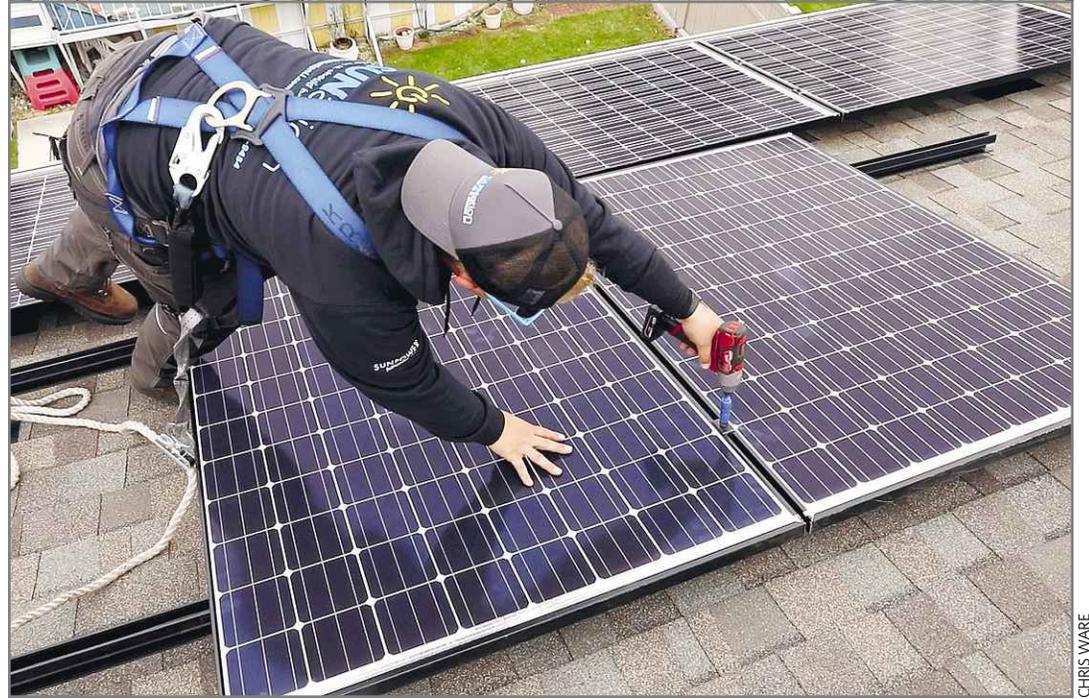
governments to issue building permits. Though the bill has the backing of leaders in Brookhaven and Huntington towns, an official in Floral Park, one village criticized for delayed approvals, says it's not needed.

A bill sponsored by State Sen. Jim Gaughran (D-Northport) would let local governments launch self-certification programs that would ease backlogs by allowing building permits to be issued based on documentation filed by the licensed architects and engineers, rather than the typical review by its building department. A second, related bill would let governments accept certain construction documents from the outside professionals to expedite issuing of certificates of occupancy.

Assemb. Steve Otis (D-Rye) has sponsored Assembly versions of the bills, which await full votes in the State Legislature. Both would need Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's signature.

The measures have the backing of the Association for a Better Long Island, the Long Island Builders Institute, the Long Island Association and local government leaders at Brookhaven and Huntington Towns, among others.

Gaughran said the measures would help clear backlogged building permits and help spark a local economy that remains



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hampered by the pandemic.

Solar installation companies say slow approvals by local building departments can lead to long delays and cost overruns.

"It's about reducing the roadblocks and reducing costs," said David Schieren, CEO of EmPower Solar, an Island Park solar-energy and battery installer. "Permits can sit in a building department for two to three weeks, and many [municipalities] can take more than two months" for approvals, he said, adding self-certification could shave weeks

off construction time and about \$750 from the cost of a typical solar rooftop installation.

Advocates said only state-licensed professionals, including architects and engineers, would be allowed to certify the construction plans and other documents, essentially putting their licenses on the line when they certify a project plan.

"Union leadership should be more concerned about the lack of future economic development investment along with a resulting retreat in tax revenue, be-

cause if those events occur the impact on municipal government staffing will be nothing short of catastrophic," said Kyle Strober, executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, a developers' group that is leading the coalition.

Only municipalities that want to allow self-certification would participate. Building inspections would still take place to make certain the projects comply with building and safety codes, and towns would sign off on the final construction, Strober said.

RIVERHEAD

Officials detail specifics for development near rail station

BY JEAN-PAUL SALAMANCA
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Riverhead, state and local business officials have unveiled the qualifications and timeline for selecting the finalists for a project to revitalize the long-blighted area around the Long Island Rail Road train station.

Riverhead began taking requests on Friday for qualifications from interested bidders on revitalizing the area on Osborne Avenue and Railroad Street. It has several vacant buildings and residents have complained it has

become crime-prone.

Interested bidders must have experience in high-quality, economically sustainable development projects; experience as a master developer; collaborative team experience; team capacity to finance and/or structure finance; and positive references from reputable contacts involved in related projects.

Bidders must submit responses by May 14. The town board will choose finalists in mid-June, and finalists will make their project presentations to the public in July. At least five devel-

opers have expressed some level of interest, according to Dawn Thomas, Riverhead's community development administrator.

Town, Assembly, county legislature and business advocacy reps said Friday that development around the area will be critical in making it a transportation hub for the North Fork.

Town Councilman Tim Hubbard said that once development is finished the benefits for Riverhead's downtown area will be "tremendous."

"There are so many little trickle-down effects from a

project like this that will help our town out," Hubbard said. "I can see them [visitors] coming down in droves using the train, alleviating some of our traffic congestion downtown and on Route 58. I can see them coming here and going for an evening to Suffolk Theater."

Republican State Assemb. Jodi Giglio, who represents the 2nd District, said the work to be done there will help generate jobs and encourage economic development.

"This is a great opportunity for developers to work with the

town in a private-public partnership to improve this area," Giglio said.

Supervisor Yvette Aguiar said she is excited about the project's potential.

"The Town of Riverhead is entering a period of unprecedented economic renaissance," Aguiar said. "We have not seen this level of positive interest from the private sector, the community as well as support from all levels of government in at least 20 years, and it is truly exciting to see Riverhead truly moving forward."