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November 10, 2025

Central Pine Barrens Commissions
Ms. Julie Hargrave, Pine Barrens Manager
624 Old Riverhead Road
Westhampton Beach, New York 11978

RE: STUDENT, STAFF AND PROPERTY PROTECTION FROM FIRE AND SMOKE RISK
EASTERN SUFFOLK BOCES
WESTHAMPTON BEACH CAMPUS
215 OLD RIVERHEAD ROAD
WESTHAMPTON BEACH, NEW YORK 11978

Dear Ms. Hargrave,

Eastern Suffolk BOCES (ESBOCES) has an 8.5-acre Special Education campus in Westhampton Beach at 215 Old Riverhead Road, opposite Gabreski Airport on the southwest corner of Stewart Avenue. The site has five (5) occupied buildings and one (1) garage for equipment and materials storage. Students and teachers are housed in four (4) of the buildings, while the fifth building is an ESBOCES Administrative Center with adult staff only. The School currently contains approximately 331 students and 260 staff, including 30 wheelchair bound students, serviced by 55 mini buses with some requiring wheelchair accessibility. The Administrative Center holds 30 additional adult staff.

ESBOCES also owns the approximately 5.6-acre parcel to the immediate west of the developed property (see attached property survey). This adjacent lot is heavily wooded with thick undergrowth and fallen trees providing a heavy fire load below the short pine tree canopy. The building closest to the wooded area, building #5, is approximately 10 feet from the tree line. Driveways and some parking spots along the western edge of the developed property are also adjacent to the tree line. Buses line up twice a day along this (and all) driveways to discharge and pick up students. This driveway also provides the only throughway connecting the campus from north to south and is an essential link through the site. Photos are appended at the end of this letter.

As a Special Education campus, K-12 students from across eastern Suffolk County, from Central Islip to Montauk, are bussed to this location from multiple public school districts, therefore, unlike the local school district, these students do not live nearby. Many students have individual teacher aides (in addition to a classroom teacher) to provide necessary care and educational support. Many specially trained therapists also provide targeted services to students



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Barton Avenue Armory
Operations & Maintenance Department
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100 Barton Avenue Patchogue, New York 11772
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as needed. Just like the student body, the specialized educational and professional staff are spread out over Suffolk County and travel to this location daily from far distances.

The ESBOCES Special Education schools are vastly different from K-12 public school districts. The local districts send special needs students to this and other ESBOCES locations for specialized education and care. Due to the make-up of the student population, with some students in wheelchairs, many others needing to be helped on and off buses, and almost all needing to be escorted from the bus to the classroom, bus drop off and pickup is necessarily slow. Buses line up along the driveways making regular drive through of the site inaccessible to other traffic for about 30 minutes in both the morning and afternoon.

This population includes several students with feeding tubes that depend on traveling nurses. Many of the students have temperature control issues and require a highly regulated environment. Although vented power dependency (ventilators) are not currently needed, they have been before and can in the future.

The students who attend this school have learning and behavioral difficulties, many in conjunction with specific medical needs. This population of special education students are generally easily triggered by loud noise, strange surroundings, and non-routine events. External stimuli like the noise, odors, smoke, sirens, flashing lights, etc. that occur during a fire emergency make caring for and regulating these students a difficult but necessary task.

As you are aware, on March 8, 2025, a large and rapidly moving brushfire raged through the Pine Barrens. Excerpts from various local and major newspapers are appended at the end of this letter that reflect the extent of the fire, the fire response by the state and local governments and volunteer fire departments.

While the fire was limited to only portions of the Pine Barrens, with damage to several structures on the west side of Old Riverhead Road close to Sunrise Highway, the impact of the firefighting response and operations was much larger. The fires resulted in heavy smoke conditions, major roadways, including Sunrise Highway and Old Riverhead Road, were closed. Other roadways for miles around were severely clogged with traffic being diverted around the closed roads, leading to lengthy traffic delays and residents unable to get to their homes until much later in the day.

Luckily, this particular fire did not ultimately directly impact ESBOCES property and it occurred on a Saturday. However, the local impacts of this and previous fires have raised concerns by ESBOCES about the safety of staff and our fragile student population in the event of a brush or wild fire while the buildings are occupied.

ESBOCES would like to generate and implement realistic plans for both an emergency evacuation and extended shelter-in-place that minimizes the impact on staff and special needs students. As part of a campus wide assessment, ESBOCES Administration met with Suffolk County Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services (FRES), the local fire department, Southampton Police, and other emergency responders, where various response measures were discussed in consideration of our vulnerable population. Due to the concerns about swift transportation access, the specialized needs and large number of transportation vehicles, the needed support systems for our physically, mentally and medically fragile students, it was determined a full-scale evacuation is likely not feasible as the most



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appropriate option in a wildfire event. Since our remaining option would be to shelter-in-place, we need to consider additional on-site pro-active fire management actions to reduce the risks of direct damage from raging fire, flying embers that ignite buildings or are drawn into the HVAC systems, and smoke inhalation or damage.

As a result, we are working to strengthen our firefighting posture to ensure the safety of the property and therefore the students and staff when a fire threat is present. As such, we anticipate installing an additional fire hydrant along the existing western property driveway to aid in firefighting operations. As recommended to ESBOCES, we are also in discussion with the local fire department about stockpiling of fire foam on-site as an option to be used as needed.

Due to the close proximity of the Central Pine Barrens tree line adjacent to our buildings, playground, bus loading zone and main throughway, ESBOCES requests the Central Pine Barrens Commission to allow for clearing of undergrowth and removal, pruning and thinning of clumps of trees within a minimum of a 30' (and up to 100') distance along the existing 915' western fence on the developed parcel, all within PROPERTY OWNED BY ESBOCES, that will reduce the risks. ESBOCES would also like to consider prescribed burning of the remainder of the wooded property owned by ESBOCES in order to reduce the fuel load.

These requested actions are directly from the practices recommended by the Central Pine Barrens Commission in the informational materials taken off the CPBC website (copy included at the end of this document for reference), excerpts directly from this source include;

Zone 1 (Immediate): 0 to 5 feet: keep wind-blown embers from igniting materials near your house. Place in this area non-combustible stone or gravel; rather than wood mulches that can ignite. Use fire-resistant plants in this area such as succulents, perennials, annuals and deciduous shrubs rather than shrubs that have thick resinous or waxy leaves or needles, such as evergreens. Remove dead leaves and woody debris. Prune tree branches back from the roof at least 10 feet.

Zone 2 (Intermediate): 5 to 30 feet: Manage your landscape to prevent a wildfire from burning toward your house. Keep your lawn mowed to four inches high. Trees and Shrubs should be placed in well-spaced islands or in clumps of 10 to 20 feet apart. Remove dead trees, shrubs and dead materials within plants. Prune trees 6 to 10 feet from the ground or shrubs underneath to prevent fire from climbing into tree tops. For shorter trees, do not prune more than one third of the overall tree height. Use non-combustible stone slabs bricks or concrete pavers to create walkways or paths that break up the path of a fire travelling along the ground towards your house.

Zone 3(Extended): 30 to 100 feet (or property line): Manage vegetation to reduce the energy and speed of a wildfire and to force the fire from treetops to the ground. Remove and dispose of heavy accumulations of dead leaves, litter and woody debris on the ground. Move or prune back vegetation adjacent to sheds or to other outbuildings. Trim trees to have 6 to 12 feet between the canopies. Prune trees 6 to 10 feet from the ground or shrubs underneath to prevent fire from climbing into treetops. For shorter trees, do not prune more than 1/3 of the overall tree height. Check with local agencies for covenants or restrictions on your property for tree and vegetation removal that would require a permit or prior approval.



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Educational Services That Transform Lives

We look forward to your approval of the suggested actions.

Sincerely,

Kristen Nannini

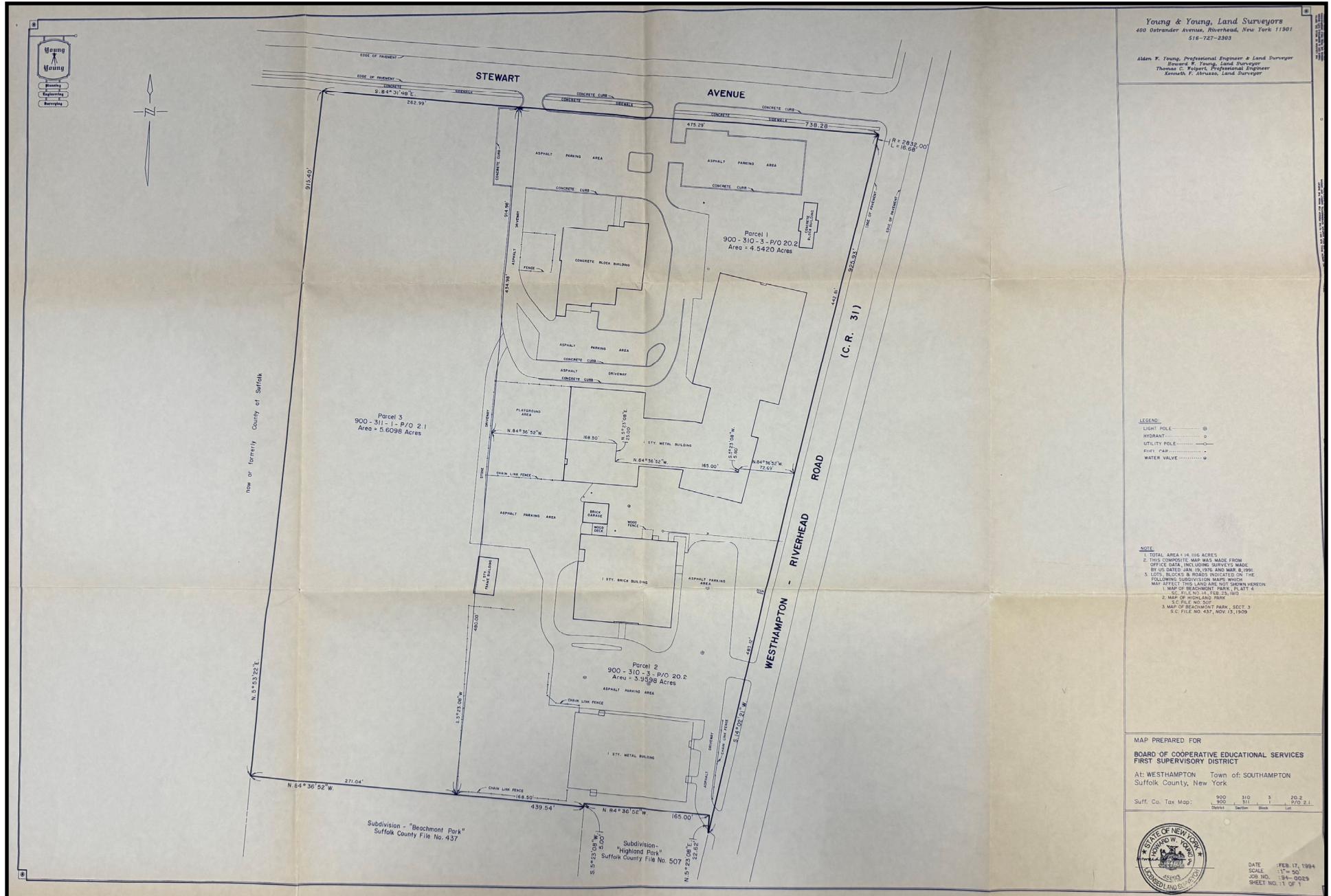
Kristen Nannini

**Program Administrator for Safety & Health
Eastern Suffolk BOCES**

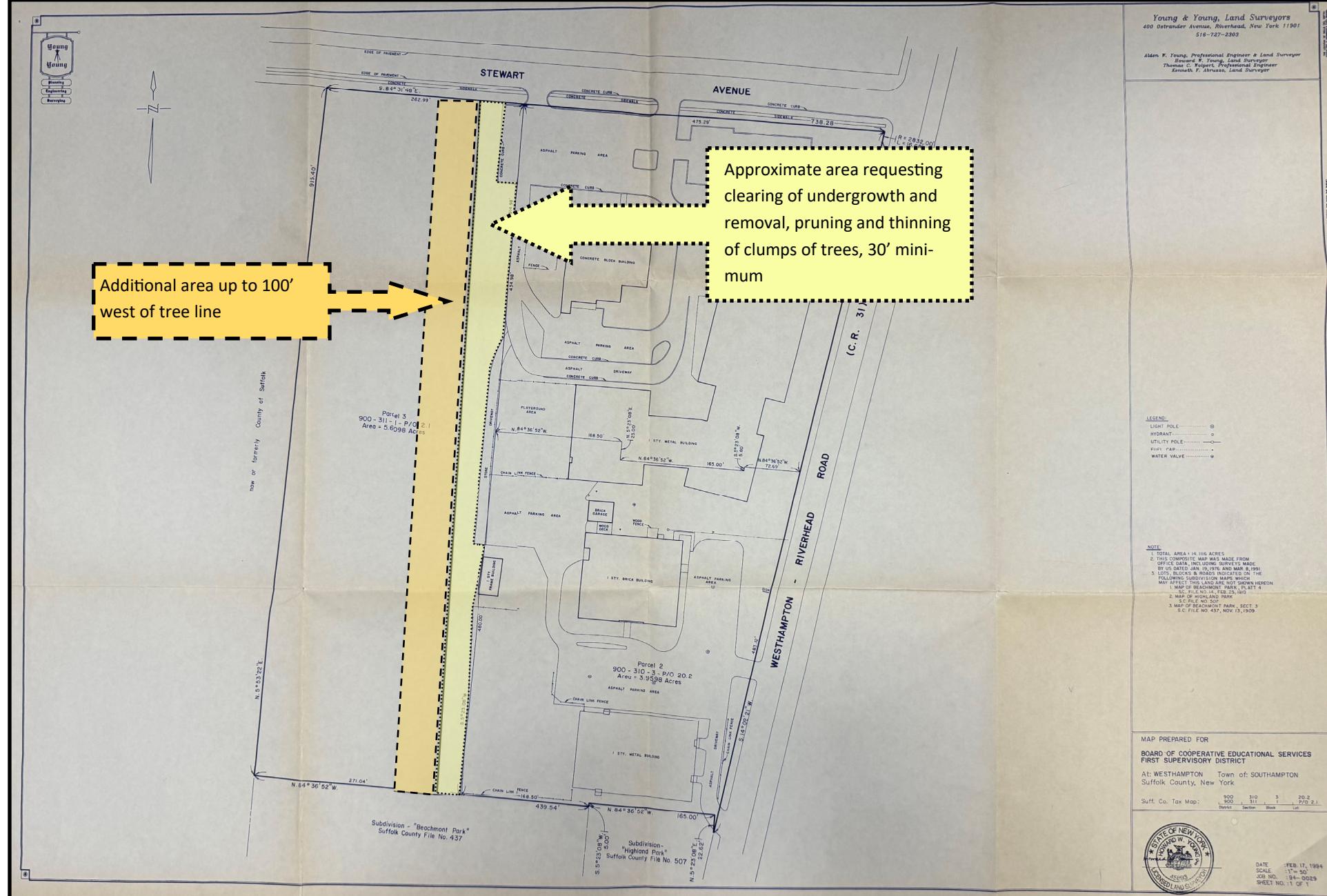


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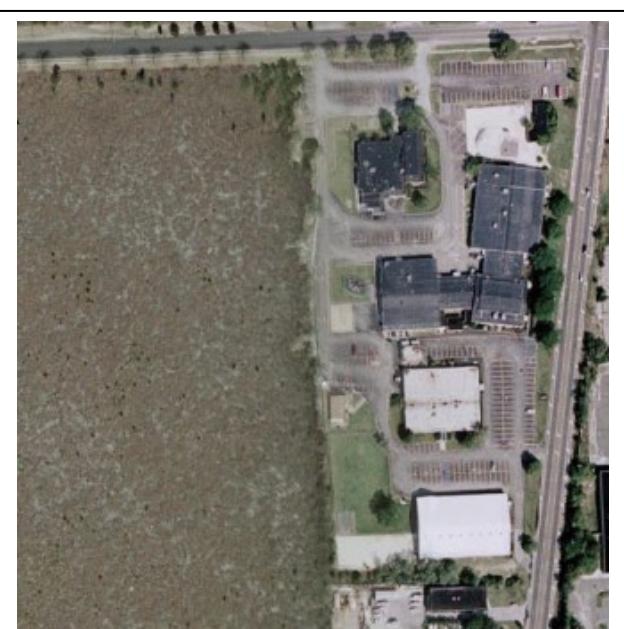
Property Survey
Eastern Suffolk BOCES Westhampton Beach Campus
215 Old Riverhead Rd Westhampton Beach, NY 11978



Proposed Clearing Area
Eastern Suffolk BOCES Westhampton Beach Campus
215 Old Riverhead Rd Westhampton Beach, NY 11978



Aerial photo 10/6/24. Approx. vacant lot outlined



Aerial 10/31/06



Typical Vegetation along Stewart Ave at lot intersection and western boundary along Stewart Ave





Typical undergrowth on vacant vegetated lot



Proximity of parked cars and travel lane on west side to the tree line on the undeveloped lot



Proximity of building 5 and play area to undeveloped lot



Busses queuing for loading and unloading in
Close proximity to tree line.



Fire and Firefighting Operations During March 2025 Fire Event





News Stories from the March 2025 Fire Event

RIVERHEAD LOCAL

(Update: March 8, 6:30 p.m.) Fire departments from across Suffolk, including the departments that protect Riverhead township, are battling multiple wind-driven brush fires in the pine barrens along Sunrise Highway this afternoon.

Eastbound Sunrise Highway is closed between William Floyd Parkway and County Road 51. Speonk Riverhead Road is also closed due to the brush fires, Southampton Town Police said.

The wildfire is burning in an area of the pine barrens north of Sunrise Highway, off Old Riverhead Road (County Road 31) west of Gabreski Airport.

More than 70 fire departments and 20 EMS agencies responded to the fires, County Executive Ed Romaine said this evening.

There were four separate wildfires burning today, Suffolk County Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services Commissioner Rudy Sunderman said this evening: Center Moriches, East Moriches, Eastport and Westhampton. The first brush fire report came in at about 1 p.m., he said.

Westhampton was the only wildfire still burning as of 5:30 p.m., Sunderman said during a press conference called by the county executive outside the Westhampton Beach Fire Department headquarters.

The fire in Westhampton is about 50% contained, Sunderman said. It was not yet under control as of the 5:30 p.m. press conference, Romaine said. It likely would not be under control for several more hours or until tomorrow, he said.

The fire damaged two commercial structures, one at Gabreski Airport and another on County Road 31, Romaine said.

Fire News photos and copy by John Neely, WHB FD; other photos submitted by Donna Marcano, Copiague FD and Dylan Caamano

The Westhampton Beach Fire Department (WHBFD) was called out for a brush fire at 1305 on March 8, 2025, on Sunrise Highway. Chief Larry Saccente reported a large brush fire on the south side of Sunrise Highway between exits 62 and 63. The fire was being driven by west winds gusting to 40 mph. The chief immediately contacted Suffolk County's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) which activated the county's fire/mutual aid plan.

Fire departments from all over Suffolk County were asked to provide mutual aid in the form of engines, tankers and brush trucks. Eighty Suffolk departments responded. Some also provided fire police who assisted with traffic control; 10 EMS units were also on scene. Eleven Nassau County crews were staged at the Suffolk County Fire Academy in Yaphank in case additional units were needed. Three helicopters were made available and were used to locate fire spots and to drop water on the fire. In all approximately six hundred first responders were involved in the incident, with support from state, town, local, and federal agencies. (Three additional brush fires broke out in Center Moriches, East Moriches, and Eastport at approximately the same time which led officials to believe the fires were perhaps intentionally set. The causes was later attributed to "s'mores" being cooked).

Because of the quick response to the fire only two commercial structures were damaged and no residences were harmed. But the strong winds prevented firefighters from stopping the fire at County Road 31. A number of brush trucks, engines, and tankers were deployed to the north section of Gabreski Airport where they were able to protect a number of storage buildings as well as a structure used to store fireworks. (It was unknown if any fireworks were in the building). By late Saturday evening all visible flames were extinguished and most of the departments were released. Westhampton Beach chiefs and the Suffolk County OEM officials remained at a command post at Gabreski overnight where they responded to a number of flare-ups. By approximately 1630 on Sunday all visible fire had been knocked down and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation reported that the fire was 40 percent contained by a bulldozed buffer zone created by crews from the DEC, Suffolk County Public Works, and the New York State Department of Transportation. Approximately 400 acres of pine barrens were burned.

NY TIMES

Long Island Wildfire Is Under Control, Officials Say

March 8, 2025

The last of the wind-driven wildfires that had stretched hundreds of acres across eastern Long Island, prompting the New York governor to declare a state of emergency, was extinguished by Sunday morning, according to local and state officials.

The fire, in the Westhampton area, was the largest of four that broke out on Saturday afternoon. By Sunday, firefighters had suppressed the flames and contained the blaze around roughly a quarter of its perimeter to prevent it from spreading, officials said at a news conference on Sunday. The wind gusts that fueled the flames on Saturday had slowed to 25 miles per hour on Sunday.

But strong air currents combined with dry conditions in the [Long Island Pine Barrens](#) could yet pose a problem, said Lewis Scott, the second assistant chief of the Westhampton Beach Fire Department.

“The weather is still a very significant concern and threat to us. We are hoping for some moisture to come in,” Chief Scott said at the news conference. “It’s not looking like that in the very near future.”

The cause of the Long Island wildfire is still under investigation, the authorities said. Detectives from the Suffolk County Police Department have interviewed 911 callers, deployed drones and flown in helicopters to determine whether arson played a role.

Wildfires periodically sweep through the Pine Barrens, [an ecosystem that depends on fire](#) in order to flourish. But the proliferation of the [southern pine beetle](#), a species native to the southern United States that kills pines and leaves behind bone-dry tree bark, might have also contributed to the rapid spread of the fires this weekend.

“There are dead trees all over because of them,” said Edward P. Romaine, the Suffolk County executive, who said thousands of trees in the area have succumbed to the insect over the last decade. “I am gravely concerned about the health and survival of the Pine Barrens as a result of that.”

By Saturday evening, at least 600 firefighters and emergency service workers had extinguished three of the fires, and the Westhampton fire was 50 percent contained.

The New York State Police said on Saturday that all lanes of Sunrise Highway were closed eastbound between Exit 62 and Exit 64. County Road 31 southbound was also closed, according to the Southampton Police Department.

By early Sunday morning, both roads had reopened, [according to data](#) from the state’s Department of Transportation.

Gov. Kathy Hochul declared a [state of emergency](#) on Saturday afternoon, she said on social media.

Image

The National Weather Service had warned early on Saturday [on social media](#) that low humidity and northwest winds of 30 to 35 m.p.h. would create an “elevated risk for fire spread.”

On Montauk Highway in Westhampton, police vehicles blocked roads leading to the Francis S. Gabreski Airport.

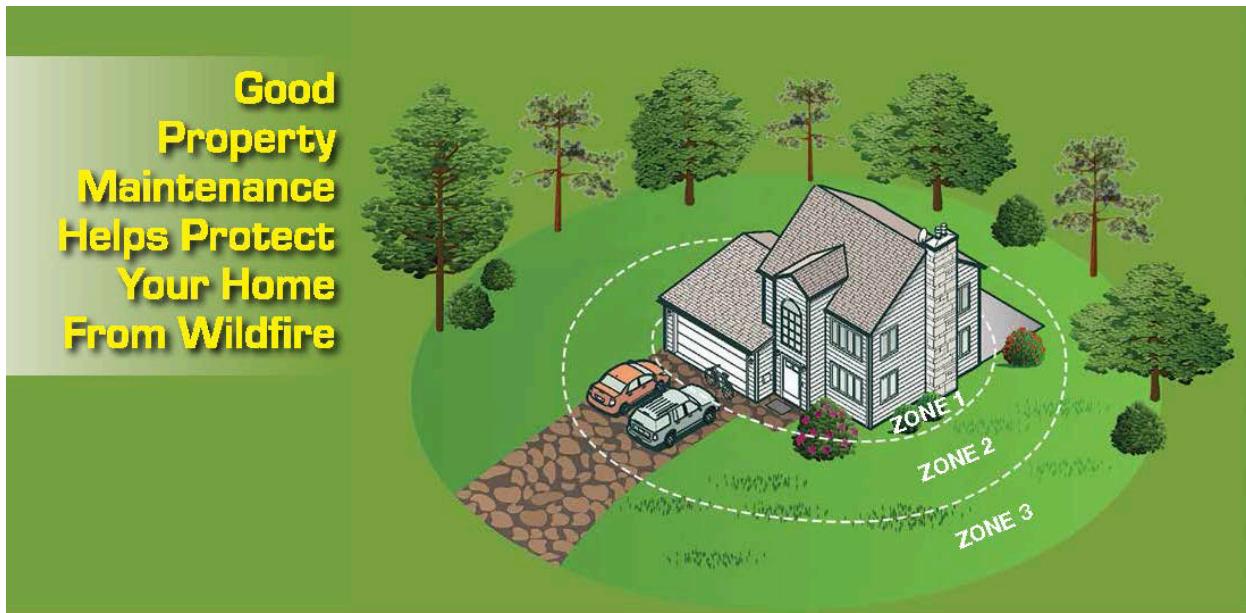
Salvatore Fracapane, 19, watched live television coverage of the fires at his job at a convenience store nearby. He said he saw smoke and smelled “burning wood chips” around 1 p.m., then saw “fire trucks from everywhere” rushing to the scene.

Information provided by Suffolk County FRES:

- Design for Wildfire Resistance <https://basc.pnnl.gov/information/design-wildfire-resistance>
NFPA 2020: (the written zone details & other resources are in the link above)

- **Firewise USA : Why These Rules Matter**
 - Embers, not flame fronts, ignite most homes in a wildfire: embers travel hundreds of feet and lodge in small debris, roof valleys, vents, or under decks.
 - Proper defensible space and ember-resistant building features together greatly reduce the chance a home will ignite independently of firefighters or suppression efforts

CENTRAL PINE BARRENS COMMISSION DOCUMENT



Zone 1 (Immediate): 0 to 5 feet: Keep wind-blown embers from igniting materials near your house. Place in this area non-combustible stone or gravel rather than wood mulches that can ignite. Use fire-resistant plants in this area such as succulents, perennials, annuals and deciduous shrubs rather than shrubs that have thick, resinous or waxy leaves or needles, such as evergreens. Remove dead leaves and woody debris. Prune tree branches back from the roof at least 10 feet.

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Source: NFPA "Prepare your home for wildfire"