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**Women in Power:**  
Flower Hill's Elaine  
Phillips leads as  
county comptroller  
(See page 4)

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Manhasset's state champs  
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parade (See page 12)

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District recognizes those who  
do good, well (See page 16)

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# Phillips Is The Taxpayers' Advocate

*Keeps an eye on county's \$3.5 billion budget*



**FRANK RIZZO**

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Getting former county employees money that was incorrectly withheld from them. Making sure vendors are up to speed on cybersecurity—otherwise they might expose sensitive county information to hackers. Tracking how the vast federal pandemic relief funds to the county are spent. Calculating the nuances of overtime so employees are properly paid.

These are a few of the many things under the purview of the Office of the County Comptroller, overseen since Jan. 1 of this year by Elaine Phillips of Flower Hill.

Phillips' political career seemed over when she lost a bid for re-election to the New York State Senate in 2017. Since then, she had used the skills acquired over a lifetime spent working for such financial giants as JP Morgan and Goldman Sachs to manage the investment portfolios of volunteer fire departments.

Phillips, a Republican, returned to the political fold last year, becoming the first woman to gain the county comptroller's office. She succeeded Democrat Jack Schnirman, who chose to step down after one term. Also the first woman to serve as mayor of Flower Hill, the native of rural Pennsylvania was the first from her family to go to college (Penn State). She has lived out her mother Betty's advice to seize opportunities. Anton Media Group recently sat down with the new comptroller.

**Q You once called yourself a retired politician. Why did you take on this job?**

**A** As a Republican on the North Shore, it's gotten more difficult to run. Also, I'm getting up there in age. So I thought I was done, but it was always been in the back of my mind. I love public service. I loved being a trustee. I loved being a mayor. And I loved being a New York State Senator. When I was asked to run for comptroller, I had to think about it. Did I have the skill set? A lot of it is leadership skills, understanding problem solving. We solve problems in this office all day long. That's what I liked the most about both my senate role and my mayoral role. I'm not a policy wonk. In this job [we deal] with [things such as] "How do we make sure our vendors are paid appropriately?" "How

do we make sure 42,000 recipients of benefits from Nassau County get those benefits in a way that they deserve?" because they worked for this county for years. This role actually fits my skill set better.

**Q What has surprised you about this department?**

**A** I was impressed with the workforce that came with the office. There's about 70 civil service workers [doing] claims, accounting, auditing, payroll, etc. And the level of professionalism, the level of knowledge, the level of commitment to their job—I must say I wasn't surprised, but I was very impressed. I've also assembled a great team around me, 11 of us. I've hired a little more senior and experienced people versus just numbers. (Phillips can hire up to 14 appointees.)

**Q Will you be doing presentations to community groups and civic associations? What about outreach?**

**A** I've received invitations to speak, but it's still too soon. When I go, I want to have something tangible to talk about. Our game plan is to get out to all [civic group] this year. One of the things we love to talk about is how we communicate with the taxpayer, things such as Open Nassau (started by her predecessor and showing how funds are being spent, county contracts, etc.) It's important that we continue to tell the taxpayer how this office is operating as the

independent protector of the taxpayer. We have a Facebook page, an Instagram page, a Twitter handle. We have a newsletter go out to about 44,000 people.

**Q What is the state of the county's financial health?**

**A** It's much better than it's been in a long time. We're in better financial condition, my guess is, than many counties.

And that is why Phillips hopes that the county can get out from under the Nassau Interim Finance Authority (NIFA) oversight.

It was created in 2000 by the state legislature to oversee Nassau's then-troubled finances.

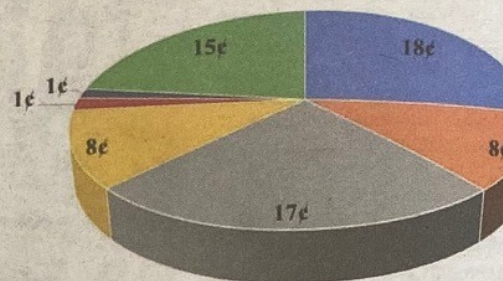
Currently, the county is under a "control period," giving NIFA additional oversight authority. According to its website, "NIFA is empowered to issue its bonds and notes for various county purposes, including the restructuring of a portion of the county's outstanding debt."

In 2021, the county, fearing a dramatic loss in sales tax revenue during the pandemic economic slowdown, got permission to delay a debt payment of \$75 million.

**Q What is your view of NIFA?**

**A** I believe that the NIFA control period should end. The [deferred] debt payment will extend the oversight period. There's some large debt payments coming in the next two years and it's going to be something that the administration and

Nassau County Gas Taxes & Fees  
(approx cents per gallon)



• Federal Taxes • State Sales Tax  
• State Petroleum Business Tax • State Motor Fee  
• State Testing Fee & MTA Fee • Town & City Taxes  
• County Taxes

This useful chart can be found on the Office of County Comptroller's Facebook page. Phillips encourages residents to follow office on social media and subscribe to the newsletter. (Screen Capture)

**“We watch the store, we're the taxpayers' protector, we [deal with] the details and the nuts and bolts.”**

— Elaine Phillips

the county legislature are going to seriously deal with. Remember, no decisions that will be made over the couple years I believe we can control the control period. No one in this elects NIFA. If you don't like what [officials] are doing, then you can boot out. There is no booting out NIFA. us millions of dollars. I think it's his responsible for this office to be more that, to watch what this legislature the next year, particularly given the service payments that are due. An manage this in a certain way, then it's time for NIFA to go.

Phillips' office appears before the legislature to comment on the proposed budget before it is adapted and also a report on the budget. It is also written on the "Fiscal Year 2021 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report" as well as the "Mid-Year Report on Nassau County Financial Condition."

Phillips said her auditors will be at the operational problems at the Department of Assessment and Office of Consumer Affairs and will also study the county's interactions with utilities to ensure that billing improvements can be made and efficiencies found.

Also on her agenda is a public effort to help residents understand the complicated assessment system.

"We watch the store, we're the protector, we [deal with] the details and the nuts and bolts," Phillips summed up.

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