

SANDY CHALLENGES ALL OF US

Death, damage and loss of power test our humanity and grit – and our resolve to do better

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NEWSDAY PHOTO / AUDREY TIERNAN

A fallen tree lies on homes and power lines in Garden City.

EDITORIAL
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Now we find out what we're made of – as Long Island discovers the full extent of the devastation that Sandy has wrought. This is not only a disaster, it's a challenge.

The sun rose yesterday on a torn and darkened region, with a small but tragic number of fatalities, uncounted injuries and physical damage – homes and cars crushed by trees, calamitous flooding, and utter powerlessness. Fully 90 percent of the Long Island Power Authority's customers lost electricity. Forget at least 10 days; realistically, it may take LIPA several weeks to get everyone's lights back on.

In the city, flooded subway tunnels mean that the economic engine of the Empire State will sputter for days, until the Metropolitan Transportation Authority can restore service.

The storm's full cost will not be known for weeks. State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli's staff is trying to assess how many billions we've lost, in physical damage and business, but that's hard to calculate. From the lost trading activity on Wall

Street to shuttered businesses across the Island, we've taken a huge economic hit – though tree-trimmers and unemployed construction workers will benefit, and some businesses will thrive.

In the damage assessment and in the rebuilding, there's a vital role for all of us.

We have a right to expect our government leaders to rise to the occasion and point the way. And they have a right to expect us to listen to their counsel. We can no longer afford to indulge in what-the-heck thinking, ignoring evacuation warnings because we don't expect anything that bad to happen.

So Babylon Supervisor Rich Schaffer and Islip Supervisor Tom Croci were sorely disappointed in residents of evacuation zones who chose not to obey the towns' advice to evacuate. That was not just a personal decision, affecting only those reluctant to leave their homes. It was a choice that endangered the lives of those called on to rescue them.

It's a time when government must set a clear priority on clearing away the de-

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bris to restore movement, and on helping those most badly hurt. But towns, villages and cities, already coping with severe budget crises, will now have to absorb incalculable added costs. The difficulty of public service just went up several notches. So did the importance of bipartisan problem-solving.

For all of us, an informed and vigilant patience is the best approach to the uncertainties ahead: whether insurers will pay for the damage, how to cope with the costs of food spoiled by the lack of refrigeration, and how to deal with any deep cold snap, when so many of our heating systems depend on electricity.

Then there's the matter of the election. Next Tuesday, we'll pick a president, plus a U.S. senator, members of the House of Representatives, the Assembly and the State Senate – plus special elections for supervisor in Brookhaven and Babylon and the 12th District of the Nassau County Legislature. But it's not clear how closely people will be able to focus on voting or what complications the lack of electricity will create at the polling places.

The biggest test of all faces LIPA. It's a

state agency, and Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo will be watching closely to see how it performs, and what that performance says about how the authority should be reconfigured for the future.

Once we know the dollar value of our losses, we must weigh that against the billions it will cost to bury power lines, and come up with a long-term plan for making our power grid more stormproof. It's no longer adequate to say that it would be too expensive. We have to ask what must change. What's truly too expensive is the economic chaos that this storm, the one last year, and others ahead will impose on us.

And there's no doubt that we now must cope with frequently freakish weather. Cuomo made that clear yesterday.

"There has been a series of extreme weather incidents," the governor said. "That is not a political statement. That is a factual statement. Anyone who says there's not a dramatic change in weather patterns, I think is denying reality."

That means rebuilding the city and the Island to face that new normal. It is a threat to our lives and livelihoods. It's a challenge we ignore at our peril.