PROVOCATOR

October 2026

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE BUFFALO TEACHERS FEDERATION VOLUME 57/NUMBER 1

DEDICATION
SOLIDARITY
PROFESSIONALISM
PRIDE
SECOND TO NONE

President Nigro Addresses Board

A plan to close or merge eight Buffalo schools has stirred emotions among the affected teachers, students, and parents at those sites. After being announced on October 2nd, the plan has changed no fewer than four times.

While there has been a slight uptick in student registration over the past two years, enrollment has been trending downward for some time. Last year, a committee met and discussed which schools would close. At the time, it was two. But a lack of transparency surrounding the entire process led then superintendent Pascal Mubenga to postpone any school closings.

Owing to the consequences of this decision, and following a message to all teachers the previous day calling for the District to wait, BTF President Rich Nigro addressed the Board at its October 21st meeting. “The impact of this is going to have quite a lasting ripple effect“, said President Nigro. “What I ask of you is please pause on this decision.”

Shortly after President Nigro’s address, Interim Superintendent Ebony Prophet-Bullock came to the microphone and announced that the decision on school closures would be postponed.



BTF Endorses Candidates for November Election

The BTF’s Political Action Committee had a busy summer interviewing candidates who requested our endorsement. To get endorsement, a candidate must run for an office that is relevant to the needs of our members. That candidate requests the endorsement, and our PAC asks a series of questions that probe where the candidate stands on certain issues that are important to us.

The exception to this procedure is candidates running for a judicial seat. Rather than interview, our longstanding practice has been to review the ratings of the local bar association(s).

Our PAC is non-partisan; we have endorsed Republicans as well as Democrats. Our interest is in supporting candidates who are pro-union, pro-teacher, and pro-public education.

After the PAC makes a recommendation, the candidates’ names go before the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee then makes a recommendation to the Council of Delegates and the Council ultimately decides who will receive the BTF’s endorsement.

For the November election, the BTF is endorsing the following candidates:

Timothy Kennedy, US Congress, District 26
Jonathan Rivera, NYS Senate District 61
April Baskin, NYS Senate District 63
Adam Bojak, NYS Assembly District 149
Karen McMahon, NYS Assembly District 146
Ryan Taughrin, NYS Assembly District 143
Lawrence Dupree, Erie County Legislature District 1
John Bargnesi, Erie County Legislature District 4
Timothy Meyers, Erie County Legislature District 7
John Gilmore, Erie County Legislature District 9
Taisha St. Jean Tard, Erie County Legislature District 2
Michael (Mickey) Kearns, Erie County Clerk
Craig Bucki, NYS Supreme Court
Anne Joynt, NYS Supreme Court



As we approach the end of the first marking period, I reflect on the many challenges we have encountered since our last Provocator edition just four short months ago. Fiscal instability in the District, dysfunctionality on the Board, Board and District-level scandals, and looming decisions about school closures and mergers add to the stress of an already challenging job.

Yet, notwithstanding these and the myriad of other challenges you face daily as a teacher in the second-largest school district in NYS, and though you may be exhausted, you still manage to coalesce around the issues that impact the lives of your students.

I witnessed the tenacity, strength, and passion of BTF union members at the October Board meeting as teachers by the dozen rose either to speak at the microphone or to support their friends and colleagues in challenging the latest iteration of the school closure/merger plan. Most impressive was the organizing done to recruit the support of colleagues, students, friends, and family. I saw and spoke with many of you sitting in collective groups with your co-workers, students, and even a couple of administrators from schools 17, 33, 59, 90, 208, 212, 309, 363, and 366! More teachers independently from other schools arrived to add volume to that collective voice.

It is not hyperbole to say that teaching is one of the most challenging jobs there are. Yet, through all this turmoil, you stand firm in your commitment to your profession and to your students. We rise to the challenge of the moment and together, take discouragement and turn it into inspiration, and turn inspiration into action to get results. This is what sets Buffalo teachers apart from all others; it is the reason I am so proud and why I will always stand with you. To quote Helen Keller, “Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much.”

In solidarity,



BTF at a Glance

BTF President
Rich Nigro

BTF Vice President
Melinda MacPherson-Sullivan

BTF Treasurer
Joseph Montante

BTF Secretary
Nicole Herkey

BTF Executive Committee Members

Pre-K-6
Rachel Binda-Lis, Kim Parzymieso, Jamie Stevens,Tara Rosa, Janine Schuster, Chris Stephens

7-12
Tom Anthony, Dennis Brancato, Tammy Curry, Sam Fritz, Mike Jeffers, Eve Shippens, Jonathan Zasowski

K-12
Amy Flynn, Mary Kiblin, Ellen Malone, Daphne McNab, Becky Moola, Gregory Sawicki, Sterling South

At Large
Tricia Andrzejewski, Danielle Harris, Brian Meyer

BTF Headquarters Staff
Rich Nigro, *President*
Melinda MacPherson-Sullivan, *Presidential Assistant*
Joseph Montante, *Presidential Assistant*
Tricia Andrzejewski, *Member Relations Officer*
Danielle Harris, *Member Relations Officer*
Nicole Herkey, *Member Relations Officer*
Nick Whitman, *NYSUT Labor Relations Specialist*

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www.btfny.org

PROVOCATOR

BTF Provocator Staff
Joseph Montante, *managing editor, photo editor*
Chris Salamone, *editor*

The ***Provocator*** is the official publication of the Buffalo Teachers Federation. It will be published six times during the 2026-2027 school year as a service to BTF members and interested parties in the community. Subscription price is included in BTF dues.

Postmaster, send address changes to:
BTF Provocator, 271 Porter Avenue,
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October 2026
Volume 57, No. 1
Circulation 4400

Letters to the Editor

PAL Receives $1,000 from BTF

The Police Athletic League of Buffalo, Inc. (PAL), is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization operating under the direction of a Board of Directors. We provide youth of the City of Buffalo with recreational, educational, and enriching preventive programming activities in a structured and supervised setting. We utilize professional recreational coaches and law enforcement personnel to provide leadership and direction for our youth. Providing the foundational tools and knowledge youth need to become responsible, successful adults.

"The Mission of PAL is to improve the immediate and future quality of life for the youth through enrichment and recreational programming in collaboration with law enforcement."

On behalf of the Police Athletic League of Buffalo Board of Directors, we would like to thank you for your Major Gift contribution in the amount of $1,000.

Thank you for supporting the Mission of Buffalo PAL and joining our efforts to improve the overall physical health, social/emotional well being, and quality of life for thousands of our youngest citizens.

Sincerely yours,
Chief Dennis J. Richards
Board President
Nekia Kemp, MS
Executive Director

BTF Donates to Cerebral Palsy Foundation

Our hearts are full as we reflect on another unforgettable Laps of Love.

Because of you, the day was filled with joy, connection, purpose, and so much love.

This year's theme, Love Bold, came to life in every step, every cheer, and every moment of support. You showed what it means to lead with courage, compassion, and commitment.

Because of you, our community came together to move our mission forward, supporting individuals with cerebral palsy and their families through lifechanging therapy grants and unwavering encouragement.

Laps of Love is more than a finish line. It's a celebration of inclusion, strength, and belonging. Together, we created a Space where everyone was seen, supported, and celebrated, capturing the true heart of our community.

Your generosity helps provide critical therapy through First Step Physical Therapy, giving individuals the opportunity to grow stronger, move more freely, and live more fully. As the need continues to grow, your support makes all the difference. Because of you, there is hope. Because of you, there is progress.

To our sponsors, volunteers, families, and supporters, thank you for showing up, believing in this mission, and helping us Love Bold.

With heartfelt gratitude,
Lauren Walier & Team Lemon Aide Committee
The Make Lemon Aide Foundation for CP

BTF Supports Kevin Hardwick

Thank you for your recent generous contribution to my campaign committee.
I truly appreciate it and look forward to continuing to work with you to better our community.
Kevin Hardwick

BTF Backs Buffalo Toronto Public Media

Thank you for making a donation of $500 to Buffalo Toronto Public Media where every day you hear and see something new, interesting and important to your life. Thank you for your generosity.

Every supporter of Buffalo Toronto Public Media is appreciated for their commitment to public broadcasting. Thank you for partnering in our efforts to remain your most trusted source for the programs you love and that make a difference in your life and in the lives of your family, friends and neighbors.

Our team is so grateful for you – the extra step that you took to support great programming for the Western New York and Southern Ontario area is a vital one. Thank you for helping us make our community a more engaging place to call home.

Sincerely,
Lisa LaTrovato, director
Leadership & Legacy
Giving Programs

BTF Donates $500 to NFJC of WNY

On behalf of the NFJC Team, we would like to thank the Buffalo Teachers Federation for their generous gift, which is so important to the many adult and youth programs that the NFJC offers to our community.

Having conversations, sharing stories, bridging divides, and building strong communities is the core mission of the National Federation for Just Communities of WNY, Inc. Founded in 1951, the NFJC consistently searches for new ways to have conversations that build relationships and community. Thank you for your support in helping us fulfill our mission. Please visit our website: www.nfjcwny.org and Facebook page @nfjcwny, for updates on programs and other initiatives.

Again, we sincerely thank you for your generosity and continued support.

Sincerely,
Rene Petties-Jones
President/CEO, NFJC of WNY

Union Trainings Help Empower Our Members

On July 30 and 31, over 40 delegates, alternates, and Executive Committee members came to the BTF office to attend a training offered by the professional staff called Delegate Training 101

While this training has been offered in the past, there are always newly-elected delegates who request the workshop. The training focused on the structure of the Council of Delegates and Building Committee, what constitutes a grievance, and strategies to handle certain situations that occur.

For the first time, the training was conducted by Member Relations Officers Tricia Andrzejewski and Nicole Herkey in conjunction with NYSUT Labor Relations Specialist Nick Whitman,

As with all of the trainings BTF has hosted over the past three years, this was in an effort to make the union stronger. The more your elected representatives know, the better off everyone will be. The power dynamic shifts when unionists know that they are on equal footing with administration when acting in the capacity of a delegate or Building Committee member!























BTF Concludes Year 3 at LAP

During the month of July, three BTF officers and three building delegates attended a four-day NYSUT seminar called the Local Action Project (LAP). The 3-year project focuses on many ways to make the union stronger and covers topics such as advocacy, communications, public relations, diversity/equity/inclusion, and political action.

The three executive officers who attended were President Rich Nigro, VP Melinda MacPherson-Sullivan, and Treasurer Joseph Montante. Joining the three officers were teachers Laurie Schuster (School 309), Cheryl Greene (School 59), and Naomi Carey (McKinley High School). The seminar was held in Lake George, NY.

This was the third and final year of LAP for the BTF. The intensive program is designed to empower local unions. Using the resources and a funding grant from NYSUT, the BTF has rebranded its logo, learned techniques for making the union even more effective, cooperated and connected with locals from around the state, and has run a successful health and safety campaign.

The days at LAP were once again a little overwhelming at times. There were several presenters who shared their expertise with the participants. The third-year participants were trained apart from the Year 1 and Year 2 teams to allow us to focus on our priorities and how to enact them.

The Year 3 session concluded with each participating local creating a display showcasing their accomplishments over the past two years. BTF also donated a basket for a drawing that was held. The basket contained local products such as Weber's mustard, Frank's hot sauce, and loganberry. Ironically, a teacher aide from the KenTon school district won that basket.

There still is much to be done. Even though the Local Action Project has concluded for us, the work continues as we put everything that was learned into action. The ultimate goal of LAP is to make the BTF not only a stronger union, but a union that is engaged with the community and respected for its ideals and principles.


1.


2.



3.

Save the Date

November 3
Election Day

November 11
Veterans Day

November 12-13
Food Drop-Off at BTF

November 13-14
Delegate Workshop
Seneca Niagra Casino

November 17
Food Pick Up by Agencies

December 3
Council of Delegates Meeting
Knights of Columbus


4.



5.

1. As NYSUT VP Ron Gross speaks, Melinda MacPherson Sullivan, Laurie Schuster, Naomi Carey, and Cheryl Greene listen.

2. A teacher aide from KenTon was the lucky recipient of the BTF gift basket.

3. Reflecting on things learned at LAP, President Rich Nigro addresses the rest of the Year 3 locals.

4. Complete with photos, BTF showed off its campaign accomplishments.

5. Sporting the new logo, notepads and other swag were given away to locals attending LAP

BTF Members and their Families Enjoy Labor Day Parade in South Buffalo

Approximately 40 BTF members and their families marched September 7 with our fellow union brothers and sisters in the annual AFL-CIO Labor Day Parade. BTF was joined by several members of Substitutes United of Buffalo, who also are NYSUT members as well as a few retirees.

Walkers marched down McKinley Parkway to Cazenovia Park where the BTF had three tents set up and enjoyed a picnic with a Chavietta's chicken barbeque complete with sides, desserts, and beverages brewed specifically for this event by Executive Committee member Brian Meyer! Marchers took advantage of the fine weather and relaxed in the park for several hours after the parade and met the BTF officers as well as teachers from other schools and their family members.

President Rich Nigro was there with his wife Marcia and his daughter Amber and Vice President Melinda MacPherson-Sullivan came with her husband Jerry Sullivan. Secretary Nicole Herkey and her husband Justin (an officer with the CWA union) were in attendance as was Treasurer Joseph Montante.

The cost of the picnic was $5 per person and children under 12 were free. All proceeds from the picnic were donated to charity and all participants were given a BTF t-shirt for the parade.


1.


3.

1. With a wave to the onlookers, President Rich Nigro walks the route with Mike Jeffers.

2. The Jeffers family was well-represented as Isla, Meike, and Hazel joined the march.

3. A regular attendee, Ellen Malone came out to show her support.

4. With the first lady Marcia Nigro behind the wheel, BTF had a vehicle in the parade.

5. Helping to carry the BTF banner, Melinda MacPherson Sullivan smiles for the camera.

6. Pictured with Kevin Hardwick, Joseph Montante and Nicole Herkey show off their new BTF shirts.


2.


4.



5.



6.



BTF Donates to Breast Cancer Research

On a cold Saturday in October, Buffalo teachers stepped up to help beat breast cancer by participating in the Making Strides Against Breast Cancer Walk. The annual event was held October 17 at the Outer Harbor and Buffalo teachers came out to help.

The donation to this worthy cause from Buffalo teachers and the BTF totaled around $3,500. The money was raised through donations, a basket raffle and 50/50 drawing at the September Council of Delegates meeting, and walk participation fees. Many schools and individual teachers donated baskets for the drawing.

In addition, for a $20 donation, members were given a pink breast cancer awareness shirt to wear during the walk and a total of 60 people bought the shirts. All of the money was donated to the Making Strides cause.

Deceased Teachers Remembered

The Buffalo Teachers Federation remembers the following active and retired members who have recently passed away. Some also later served as administrators.

Marie Abbarno
Mario Amorese
James Aprile
Dennis Barniak
Carol Bauda
William Bender
Joan Bogdan
Alice Bragg
Diane Buenafe
Judith Capodicasa
Colette Carse
Thomas Centofanti
Joseph Cercone
Barbara Jane Day
William Dockery
Joyce Dorsey
James Dudeck
Joan Dulak
Keith Feltges
Kevin Fritz
Kathleen Glascott
Howard Gordon
Ronald Gramza
Kathryn Gutheil
Ellen Harrity
Linda Haseley
Elizabeth Henderson
Joan Heuer
Brenda Hicks-Russell
Patricia Hitzges
James Holland
Virginia Homewood
Glynis Hunt
Robert Hunter
Marion Iwinski
Erica Jennings
Christal John-Millin
Barbara Johnson
Lisa Latempa-Dubenion
Margaret Lattimer
Jean Leiner
Deborah Loccke
John Logel
Gail Marzullo
Dea McAuliffe
Margaret McGrath
Delores Mesi
Anne Michael
Louis Motyka
Lalaysha Noble
Robert Pagani
Thomas Palamuso
James Possinger
Dennis Pulisi
Judith Rauls
Gerald Reeves
Lois Rojas
Robert “RC” Shields
Ralph Steger
Kathleen Vitagliano
Richard Wall
Joanne Walsh
Marilyn Widger
Edward Witul

Editor note: This year’s list has been particularly painful for me to type. Six active teachers passed in the last year: Colette Carse, Kevin Fritz, Robert Hunter, Erica Jennings, Lisa Latempa, and Lalaysha Noble. Erica was just 38 years old. I spoke with her husband on a few occasions while she was undergoing treatment. Kevin took my place as a math teacher at Olmsted when I came to work at BTF. Colette stopped in at the BTF office with her dog, Bart, shortly before she died. I met with Lalaysha at the office in the fall of 2025 and visited her in hospital just about 2 weeks before she passed. I did not personally know Robert or Lisa, but by all accounts they were excellent teachers and fine people.

In addition, I worked with Lynn Widger and Ralph Steger at School 56 in the 1990s. Both helped mentor me and taught me a lot. Bill Dockery, Ron Gramza, and Lou Motyka were colleagues of mine at Seneca Vocational many years ago and positively impacted hundreds of students. Judy Rauls was an NEA-NY Uniserve Director at the BTF when Tom Pisa was president. Kathy Vitagliano’s twin boys were students of mine. And lastly, RC Shields was my next door neighbor when I was a child. May they all rest in peace.

JM




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Miss Buffalo Solidarity Cruise Makes Return Voyage

Approximately 60 BTF members, their friends, and families embarked August 23 on a Solidarity Cruise aboard the Miss Buffalo.

It was a sunny day with a cool, fresh breeze. Still, many of the participants enjoyed going out on the ship's deck to socialize. Arranged by Amy Flynn, co-chair of the Social Committee, the two-hour cruise along the Buffalo Harbor included an array of hot and cold appetizers and a cash bar. Participants paid $10 each for the event.

















Welcome New Members

The following 101 teachers have joined the Buffalo Teachers Federation since the last issue of the *Provocator*. Welcome to the union!

Heidi Abel
Oumar Adam Hassaballah
Jennifer Aldrich
Stephanie Allaire
Jaime Annarino
David Aragona
Alyssa Arch-Schmitt
Brooke Attia
Charisse Austin
Lynnette Baker
Megan Barnes
Alexander Barraclough
John Barry
Henry Brophy
Patrice Calabrese-Nash
Christina Canedo
Daniel Castner
Maureen Cattieu
Krystle Ciesielski
Kiersten Coley
Kevin Croakley
Cheyon Cross
Helena Destro
Daniela DiDomizio
Kathryn Diminuco
Jack Dolan
Roberta Duffy
John Eschler
Lauren Estep
Sarah Evans
Robert Falk
Niko Feliciano
Shannon Gannoe
Justin Garbarz
Oishee Ghosh
Danielle Gray
Doris Green
Jennifer Greene
Michael Griffin
Victoria Gullo
Mackenzie Gurrola
Amber Hall
Jalisa Harper
Meaghan Hayes
Aliyah Hodges
Denise Jackson
Jake Jax
Jessica Jones
John Jones
Julie Jones
Steven Kabza
Kevin Kauffman
Gabriela Lyons
Lara Macdonald
Stephanie Madeja
Jaleesa Martin
Leah Mazurek
Kyle McGinnis
Tyler Mecklenburg
Jordan Mendola
Robert Merkle
Eric Middaugh
Kala Miller
Marita Miller
Rebecca Moran
Patricia Moynihan
Olivia O'Neill
Jacob Panza
Nicholas Pattilio
Katherine Pellow
Jose Perez
Lia Pinelli
Elena Pochodylo
Michaela Polak
Keiana Porter
Orianna Pritchett
Autumn Ragonese
Nohelys Reyes
Danielle Ricci
Brittany Rodriguez
Trisha Shea
Melissa Snyder
Tiffany Stampfer
Taylor Stockmeyer
Ian Szeglowski
Emily Tronolone
Lyndsey Truilizio
Kayla Tu
Tara Tucker
Lauren Vanderwerf
Pamela Walier
Shuang Wang
Maria Warthling
Keary Waytena-Constantine
Kathryn Weaver
Jessica Widmer
Taylor White
Jazmine Williams
Brianna Yaw
Ally Zelinsky
Madelynn Zilka

Kennedy Fights Medicaid Cuts

In July, US Congressman Tim Kennedy held a press conference at Evergreen Commons on Prospect Avenue. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries was in attendance and the BTF was well represented.

Along with his Democratic colleagues, Kennedy was fighting against these cuts that would take away health insurance for potentially millions of people in this country. The cuts stem from the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which will slash nearly 1 trillion dollars in federal Medicaid spending over a 10-year period.



ABOVE: *In attendance at the press conference, left to right, were: Eve Shippens, Melissa Kenney, Rich Nigro, Trish Andrzejewski, Nicole Herkey. Tammy Curry, and Ruyvette Townsend. In the top row are Congressmen Tim Kennedy and Hakeem Jeffries.*

Danielle Harris Named Member Relations Officer

Danielle Harris, a member of the BTF Executive Committee, joined the BTF staff September 14 in the newly-created position of Member Relations Officer (MRO). She joins Nicole Herkey and Tricia Andrzejewski in her new role.

Harris was elected to an At-Large seat on the Executive Committee in 2025. Prior to that, she was a long-time member of the Council of Delegates and served as delegate and delegate chair.

Prior to her BTF appointment, Harris, the married mother of two, was a Special Education teacher at School 30 and served as a literacy coach there for the past 13 years.

"The union is important to me and it's important for our members to understand what our union does", Harris said, explaining why she accepted the position.

The job of the MRO is to provide various services to our members. That could entail answering questions about leaves of absence, seniority, contractual rights and benefits, or even representing teachers if they are called into a meeting with the principal. Eventually, Harris will be representing teachers at Level II and Level III grievance hearings.

Harris began training for the position this past summer by attending the NYSUT Leadership Institute. She is currently training with Herkey and Andrzejewski at the BTF and will also attend NYSUT trainings in Albany that are designed for Labor Relations Specialists. The trainings take about 18 months to complete.





Representing BTF, Left to Right: Greg Conley, Treasurer Joseph Montante, President Rich Nigro, Vice President Melinda MacPherson-Sullivan, Greg Sawicki, and Amy Flynn

BTF Members Attend National Convention of the American Federation of Teachers

Six members of the BTF, elected by the BTF membership to represent the Federation at the national convention of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), attended the event July 15-19 in Washington, D.C.

The AFT, which represents nearly 1.9 million educators, healthcare professionals, and public employees, held its biennial convention in the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. Representing the BTF at the convention were: BTF President Rich Nigro, Vice President Melinda MacPherson-Sullivan, Treasurer Joseph Motante, Greg Conley, Greg Sawicki, and Amy Flynn.

During the convention, AFT President Randi Weingarten delivered a powerful message in her State of the Union address before thousands of delegates, calling on them to harness “the power of the people” and “change the trajectory of this nation and secure a better future for all”.

She told the delegates that unions remain one of the few forces capable of standing up to concentrated wealth and political power. “Yes, the other side has enormous power”, she said. “But this is what they don’t have: The power of the people.”

She also drew a stark moral contrast between the needs of working families and the Trump administration’s policies. That, she said, is the difference between the values of the labor movement and the administration’s policies. “We use our power for good—against chaos, cruelty, and corruption”, she said.

Over the last two years, Weingarten said AFT members have negotiated contracts that raised pay, expanded healthcare, improved retirement security, strengthened staffing protections, and secured paid family leave.

She also highlighted victories beyond the bargaining table, such as through the AFT’s student debt clinics and advocacy, more than 1 million borrowers—many of them AFT members—have received $78 billion in student loan forgiveness. The union has filed more than 25 lawsuits challenging administration policies affecting public education, higher education, civil rights and free speech. It has launched national campaigns to strengthen higher education and healthcare, fought for safeguards around artificial intelligence in schools and colleges, and put more than 11 million books into the hands of children through its Reading Opens the World program.

Peoples-Stokes Retires from NYS Assembly

Crystal Peoples-Stokes, the Majority Leader of the NYS Assembly, is retiring as of the end of 2026. While she did receive a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Buff State, she is best known for her work in local politics.

In 1993, Peoples-Stokes was elected to the Erie County Legislature and was appointed Majority Leader in 1998. Then in 2002, she was elected to the NYS Assembly, District 141. She began her term in 2003 and served without interruption. In December 2018, she was elevated to the position of Majority Leader of the Assembly.

On recent visits the BTF made to Albany for Committee of 100, Peoples-Stokes hosted the BTF in her conference room and was receptive to our requests.

A farewell reception was held for the outgoing Assembly leader in October and President Rich Nigro was in attendance.

We hope to develop a working relationship with her successor, Leah Halton-Pope.



ABOVE: *BTF President Rich Nigro attended the farewell reception for NYS Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes on October 16th at The Powerhouse on Lee Street.*