



School board member Martin Walsh, right, makes a point to an angry parent as board attorney Max Margolies and board president Bea Bryson look on

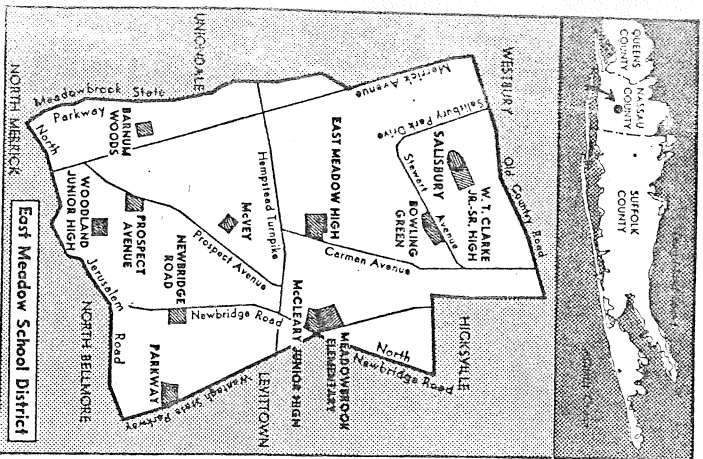
Newsday Photo by Gerald Williams

A VIEW FROM EAST MEADOW

Community? It's Just Another Word

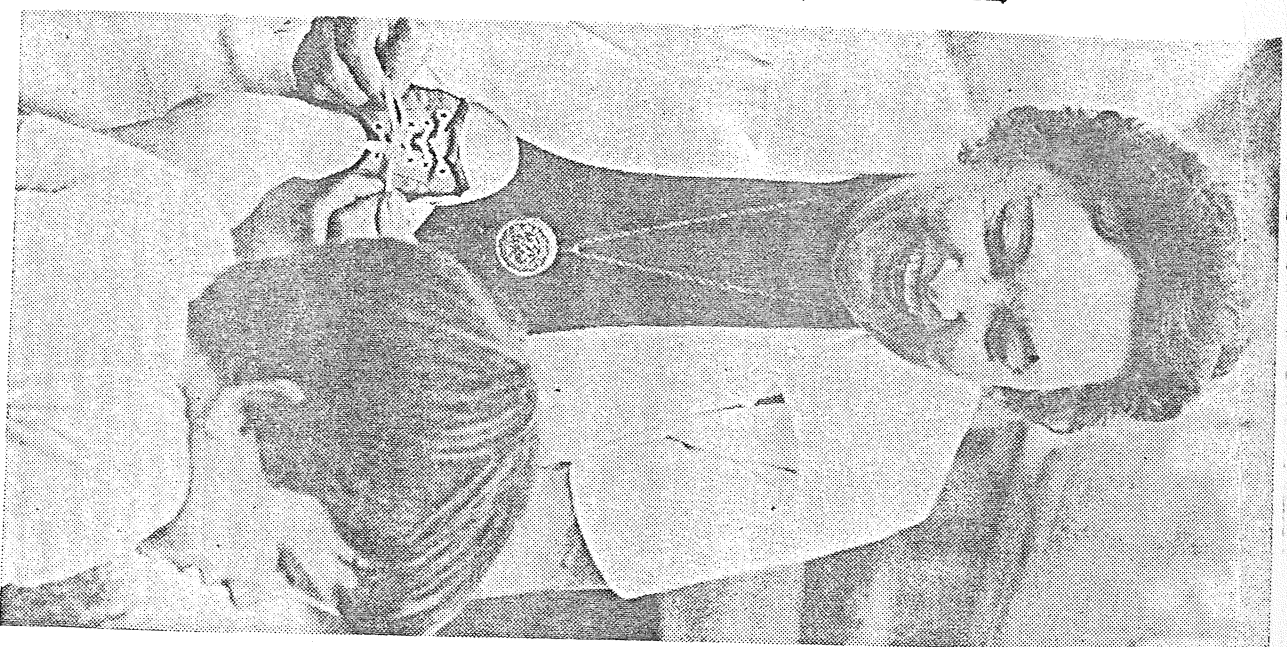
Newsday
9-3-74

'We've never been a real community... It never bothered me.'
—Evelyn Stolz



Newsday Map by Philip Dionisio

Spread over 8.7 square miles in the middle of Nassau County, East Meadow is an unincorporated area bounded on the west by Meadowbrook Parkway and Merrick Avenue, on the north by Old Country Road, on the east by Newbridge Road and Wantagh State Parkway, and on the south by North Jerusalem Road. Its 14,500 households have a median income of \$14,277.



Mrs. Stolz and her grandson, Michael Shannon
Newsday Photo by Naomi Laskin

It was the opening night of the St. Raphael's Church fair. Gaily lit in the southeast corner of East Meadow, the church lot was filled with youngsters tossing dimes at a double-or-nothing board, young men firing baseballs past the heads of teddy bears and families walking about in a fair-ground minuet.

But just a half-mile from the fair, East Meadow lay in a dark, summer-night slumber and it was impossible to know that it was the opening night of a community fair. In East Meadow, little community feeling extends beyond individual neighborhoods—which is just fine, thank you, with the residents.

"I never had any wish that we had a real town here," Evelyn Stolz of 1920 Bly Rd. said recently. "We've never been a real community, we've always been scattered. It never bothered me." Mrs. Stolz, now a widow, moved to her seven-room house 25 years ago—because she liked the house—and stayed to raise three children.

"People who move to communities like East Meadow take it as given that the community will stay the way it is," said Sal Primeggia, a professor of sociology at Adelphi University. "If the community stays that way, fine. If the community doesn't, then fine too. The residents will say, 'We'll just have to move again.' The paradox is that the most stable communities are where people don't work at it."

Relatively few people have left East Meadow in recent years. According to the 1970 census, 80 per cent of the population remained in the same houses between 1965 and 1970.

"I've never had any problems in the community," Mrs. Stolz said. "I'd like to have to pay less taxes, but that's all." Mrs. Stolz, who lives with her two youngest children, both in their 20s, leaves East Meadow to shop and work. "I'm a Long Islander," she said, oblivious to the invisible borders that separate the area from its neighbors.

Like a giant amoeba, East Meadow often changes its shape. Its fire, water and school districts all have different boundaries. East Meadow straddles Hempstead Turnpike in central Nassau as a collection of neighborhoods that sprang up in the 1950s and early '60s and were fitted into school district lines drawn in the 1850s, when the area was still Hempstead's eastern meadow. That district now includes parts of Westbury, Levittown and North Bellmore.

There is no main street and, except for the library, no place where people from different sections can meet. People who live on one side of Hempstead Turnpike often get lost when they try to find streets on the other side. Many never even bother to cross the road.

But all is not idyllic in the bedroom community of 57,245. During the past year, the Chamber of Commerce reports, lack of business has forced 37 small stores to close, prompting calls for state and federal help. Also, in an area with no industrial property to produce tax revenue, the fact that East Meadow is the home of the county's jail, hospital and Eisenhower Park—all tax-exempt—is a touchy subject in one of Nassau's most tax-conscious communities. In addition, teenagers can be found getting high on drugs or liquor around Eisenhower Park's lake, trying to fight the boredom of another suburban summer. And East Meadow's traditional sore point—the school system—again aroused conflict two weeks ago.

The issue in recent weeks centered on whether the school district's learning center program, which is similar to other districts' open-classroom programs, would be expanded into two of the district's junior high schools from the elementary schools. But underlying the debate was nearly two decades of bitter division in the community, stemming in large part from the invasion in the 1950s by Catholics and Jews from New York City. Since then, the community has developed a tradition of bitter and convulsive fighting. Not surprisingly, the schools became the focus of that conflict, because there was no other forum to which all groups had access.

"Back in the old days, there was no question about the fact that anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic feeling ran high," said Tom Freda, the head of Independent Taxpayers of East Meadow, which controls the school board. "I do not feel, except in isolated cases, that this is an issue any more. But the underlying tensions are still there. It's like a security blanket in a strange way."

Freda, who also coaches the East Meadow High School football team, argued that these old tensions have now been replaced by economic ones. However, to a degree, the separation is maintained by the wide spread in economic levels and by the division of the neighborhoods.

"In part, the population explosion in East Meadow came on an ethnic basis. People were looking for, I hate to say it, their own ghettos," Edward Grause, a long time liberal civic leader, explained. "And when it came time to organize themselves, people organized with the people they knew."

That, in turn, gave rise to annual campaigns in local synagogues and churches for each side's candidates. At school board meetings, code words are used to get the message across. "The Cadillac crowd" is a reference to the liberals, developed years before the Manhattan "Jimousine liberal" appellation became popular. In response, others are regu-

—Continued on Page 24



Newsday Photo by Gerald Williams
East Meadow resident Janet Thayer discusses the controversial learning centers at a recent board meeting.

E. Meadow: Community Is Just Another Word

—Continued from Page 6
larly chided for their interest in football, a symbol, to some, of conservative values.

Tensions sometimes spill outside school board politics. One local social worker described the effect this way: "It comes out a lot here in what my clients say. After a while, it'll spill out: 'I don't want my kids around with those kind of kids.' You can fill in the 'those kind' blanks from either side."

The battle over the learning-center expansion plan once again pitted liberals against conservatives. Since the elections in June, the conservatives, all sponsored by the Independent Taxpayers group, have held a 7-0 majority on the board. However, on the learning-center issue, the board was divided, initially, only 4-3 against it. But, after three emotion-wracked meetings, the board voted 4-2 in favor of expanding the centers into the junior high schools. The meetings gave both sides an opportunity to vent their spleens, after a summer recess. For example:

• Near the end of the meeting on Aug. 24, Al Roth of 18 Melody Lane, Westbury, a defeated liberal candidate in the June school board elections, bolted from his seat and tried to attack conservative heckler Edward King of 2609 Arleigh Rd. "You interrupt me, Mr. Queen, and I'm gonna wipe you out," Roth raged. Several men stepped between the two and Roth apologized to the board.

• Moments earlier, Lorraine Updegraff, of 4 Legend Lane, Westbury, a conservative partisan, interrupted two conservative school board members who were saying that they would not oppose the expansion. "You lie like a rug," Mrs. Updegraff screamed while kicking the chair in front of her. "That's not what you said at the [candidates] screening session, damn you."

To be sure, that fratricidal struggle ceases on the rare occasions when the community feels threatened by an unwanted outsider, be it a high-rise apartment complex in nearby Mitchel Field, or a 212-foot-high radio relay tower. Plans for both projects were scrubbed after prolonged community opposition.

For a community with such a long memory for feuds, it appears to have little regard for its own history. A cattle pasture for much of its history, East Meadow remained largely unsettled into the 20th Century except by the wealthy. A mansion named "Brookholt" was built by Alva Belmont, the first wife of industrialist William K. Vanderbilt, in the early part of the century. The family sold it and the mansion was destroyed in a fire caused by an illegal still during Prohibition. It has been replaced by a small strip shopping center at what is now Merrick Avenue and Front Street. East Meadow's oldest building, the Schulze Hotel, built in the 18th Century on the corner of Prospect and Newbridge Avenue, is now displayed at the village restoration in Old Bethpage. And, in 1959, the Chamber of Commerce held a 300th anniversary party for East Meadow, at East Meadow's Levittown Skating Rink. Almost no one attended and the chamber said it took years to pay off its debt.

"People are worried about their families, their houses, and their schools," sociologist Prineggia says. "In a community like East Meadow, the people are content to leave the rest well enough alone."

And to outsiders, East Meadow remains little more than another anonymous 5,500-acre section of suburbia. "East Meadow, huh?" a county planner said when asked about the community. "We don't have anyone who focuses on that. I don't think anyone really does East Meadow? Hmmmm."