

Dumping bust a record

NY's Operation Pay Dirt nets nearly 2 dozen

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Nearly two dozen people were arrested Tuesday in an undercover operation that New York's top environmental official described as the "largest-ever bust of illegal dumping in the state's history."

The monthslong undercover operation called Operation Pay Dirt stretched across Long Island and New York City and found 21 new illegal dumping sites, said Basil Seggos, commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Officials said they arrested 23 people, charged 12 companies and seized 18 vehicles in connection with illegal dumping of construction and demolition debris.

"The intent is to reveal the

scale of this problem, to crack down on the polluters and bring to justice those who sought to damage our environment," Seggos said of the investigation.

Suffolk County District Attorney Timothy Sini said the investigation focused on a self-proclaimed dirt broker who offered clean fill to residents who instead got solid waste, construction and demolition debris in their backyards.

The joint investigation began in February after county investigators found evidence that the broker, Anthony Grazio, also known as Rock, offered to give a Central Islip homeowner free clean fill and instead arranged for solid waste to be dumped in the backyard without the resident's knowledge, Sini said. Grazio also brokered deals with recycling and solid waste management facilities, Sini said.

The district attorney said his office will convene a special grand jury that will conduct investigations and report on "a broader picture of how we end dumping in Suffolk."

State investigators tracked down people and companies in-

involved in illegal dumping by going "into undercover mode," following materials out of New York City, and tracking where the waste was being illegally dumped, Seggos said. Arrests were carried out by about 150 police officers, including Suffolk County police, starting at 4 a.m. Tuesday, he said.

State officials did not release the names of the majority of people or companies charged, saying not all of those arrested had been arraigned. The investigation and operation is continuing, and the DEC will work to ensure polluters are held accountable for cleanup efforts, an official said.

Charges ranged from criminal mischief to endangering public health, safety and the environment, Sini said.

Operation Pay Dirt is part of a larger initiative called Operation TrashNet, which Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo launched in February 2017 to crack down on the increased amount of illegally disposed construction and demolition debris across the state, officials said.

"Illegal dumping poses a serious threat to our environment,

and New York will not allow any unscrupulous businesses to continue to harm this state," Cuomo said in a statement Tuesday.

Of 25 locations investigated — including public lands and parks — officials disclosed one is a vacant lot next to Brentwood North Middle School, where construction and demolition debris was discovered last summer when the site was supposed to be repaired and used by a nonprofit youth soccer club. State environmental officials have said remediation could not begin until they determined the suspects responsible for the illegal dumping.

John Spadaro, a Brentwood firefighter who has been concerned about the site, said he was "relieved" to hear about the arrests.

"I'm glad they're doing something," Spadaro said. "The taxpayers hopefully won't have to absorb the burden of that cleanup over there."

Public and government attention has been focused on illegal dumping since 2014 when investigators discovered nearly 40,000 tons of contaminated debris in Roberto Clemente Park in Brent-

wood. The dumping, which involved three other parcels in Suffolk, led to the convictions of five men, including two Islip Town parks employees.

Tuesday's arrests were the most for illegal dumping in the state since 2001, when 35 people and 21 businesses were indicted for allegedly dumping thousands of gallons of waste fluid, including motor oil and antifreeze, officials said. The current investigation is focused on solid waste.

Of 73 million tons of construction and demolition debris created in New York City every year, about 635,000 tons — or 8.7 percent — end up in fields, open spaces or private properties instead of going to transfer stations, permanent landfills or legal reuse, Seggos said.

TrashNet has also led to 582 DEC-issued tickets involving 40 trucking companies, Seggos said. With Tuesday's discovery of 21 additional sites, officials have uncovered 81 illegal dumping sites statewide, including 44 in Suffolk and eight in Nassau, he said.



Probe included lot between Brentwood State Park and Brentwood North Middle School, seen June 27.

YEONG-JUNG YANG

Curran to keep Mangano assessment plan

BY CELESTE HADRICK
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Nassau County Executive Laura Curran this year will keep her predecessor's program of settling most property tax challenges by reducing assessments before tax bills are issued, thus increasing the disparity in taxes paid by those who protest their values compared with those who do not.

But county officials, legisla-

tors and tax attorneys say Curran has no choice but to extend the settlement program — which has shifted \$2.2 billion in taxes since 2011 from those who challenge their assessments to those who don't — until an ongoing reassessment is completed and new property values are issued in January.

"We do not have a defensible tax roll," said Curran spokesman Michael Martino. "We are forced into a settlement policy

that reflects that fact."

Continuing the settlement program "obviously would exacerbate the situation the administration wants to fix," said Minority Leader Kevan Abrahams (D-Freeport). "I'm not too sure of other options that you can do until you complete the reassessment."

Former Nassau County Executive Edward Mangano froze assessment increases in 2011 while granting thousands of re-

ductions to property owners who challenged their values. The plan was to reduce the \$100 million in tax refunds Nassau was paying each year because of erroneous assessments.

But granting assessment reductions to some property owners increased tax bills for those who didn't challenge their assessments, mostly in minority and low-income areas. A Newsday investigation last year found \$1.7 billion in taxes had

been shifted from mostly affluent property owners to everyone else. An update in January increased the total shift to \$2.2 billion. Newsday projected the disparity would be likely to grow by about \$1 billion more until reassessment kicks in.

The settlement program also distorted assessments, which are supposed to reflect property market value. The settlement program further reduced assessments even as values rebounded.

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