

Victim's Family Supports Romaine Legislation Backing Stronger NYS Hit & Run Penalties

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Pictured left to right are Superintendent of Highways Dan Losquadro, Former MADD president Denna Cohen, Councilwoman Jane Bonner, Jennifer Benjamin, Andrew Benjamin, Lindsay Benjamin, State Senator Ken LaValle, Councilman Dan Panico and Supervisor Ed Romaine.

Bill would increase penalty on fatal accidents up to 15 years in prison

Farmingville, NY - Brookhaven Supervisor Ed Romaine, Town and local state officials today were joined by the friends and family of hit and run victim Karen Benjamin in demanding the New York State Assembly pass legislation to increase penalties for leaving the scene of an accident. The press conference was held at the corner of Mt. Sinai-Coram Road and Canal Road in Mt. Sinai, less than a block from where Mrs. Benjamin was killed by a hit and run driver. Former MADD president Denna Cohen also attended the press conference.

"Each day that the New York Assembly fails to pass this legislation and bring it to the Governor for his signature is another day that our residents and children who walk, jog, or ride their bikes are in danger," said Supervisor Romaine.

The legislation (S.2503), co-sponsored by Senators Ken LaValle and Lee Zeldin, will increase the penalties for leaving the scene of an accident where property damage, serious personal injury or death occurs. The penalty for repeat hit and run drivers who cause property damage or personal injury would be elevated from a Class E Felony to a Class D Felony. Drivers who flee from the scene of an accident where someone was killed would now face Class C Felony.

The Brookhaven Town Board unanimously approved a home rule message on October 1, sponsored by Romaine, supporting this legislation and urging the New York State Assembly to bring the bill to the floor for a vote.

Karen Benjamin, 56, was struck by a hit and run driver on June 23 while jogging along Canal Road. She was taken off of life support July 17 after sustaining severe head injuries and undergoing several operations. Thomas Costa, 31, a Coram man who was on parole at the time of the incident, has been charged.

"It's outrageous the number of people who have died by hit and run drivers, and the person behind the wheel walks

away with little more than a slap on the wrist. How many more people have to lose a mother, wife or friend before the State Assembly finally takes action, and passes this bill? Have you ever seen a victim of a hit and run driver that was left on the road to die. These heartless drivers are basically getting away with murder," said Lindsay Benjamin. "I want to thank Supervisor Romaine and the Town Board for bringing attention to this important issue. I also want to thank Senators LaValle and Zeldin, and Assemblyman Thiele for their continuing support in sponsoring this bill in the State Legislature."

"It seems that a day does not pass that we read about deaths caused by hit-and-run drivers," Senator LaValle said, "and we later learn that the driver was intoxicated or under the influence of drugs. This legislation, rightfully, closes loopholes in the law."

"I echo my colleagues in urging the Assembly to pass this important piece of common sense legislation," said Senator Zeldin. "Failure to do so is an absolute injustice to the innocent victims of hit and run tragedies. They deserve better. Furthermore, the law should also be fixed because hit and run drivers could actually face less punishment by fleeing the scene than staying and being caught in the event that they are driving with drugs or alcohol in their system."

"As a co-sponsor of this legislation, I am determined to increase penalties for those who leave the scene of an accident," said Assemblyman Thiele. "With these unfortunate incidents on the rise here on Long Island, we must work together to improve the safety of our roadways for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists alike."

"How many tragedies will have to occur before the New York State Assembly takes up this bill and passes it into law," asked Councilwoman Jane Bonner. "Anyone who leaves the scene of an accident, especially when someone is injured or killed, shows nothing less than a blatant disregard for human life and they should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law and face the harshest penalties allowed."

"Much like the Benjamin tragedy, on July 29th of 2011, Erika Hughes of Shirley, was hit by a driver who left the scene. Had the driver stopped and called for help Erika would still be here today and her young daughter would have her mother," commented Brookhaven Town Councilman Dan Panico. "The driver's sentence was unbelievably just over a year in jail because of the current laws that actually encourage drivers to flee for shorter sentences. We need to change this law and I call upon State Assembly Leader Sheldon Silver to release this bill and call for a vote. The Senate did the right thing by passing a law to make sentences tougher and it is time that change these laws so that Erika Hughes and Karen Benjamin's deaths are not in vain"

"My thoughts and prayers are with the Benjamin family," said Superintendent of Highways Daniel P. Losquadro. "By increasing the existing penalty from a misdemeanor to a felony for leaving the scene of an accident it will make drivers think twice about their decision making process and in doing so save lives."

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