

RIVEREAST

News Bulletin

Serving Amston, Andover, Cobalt, Colchester, East Hampton, Hebron, Marlborough, Middle Haddam and Portland

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Catching the Spirit... Marlborough Elementary School sixth-grade student Jacob Coates came to school recently wanting to do something for his community. He suggested the school participate in a Holiday Spirit Day where students could wear their most festive attire and, in return, bring in a pair of slippers or toiletries to donate to the local Veterans Holiday Drive. On Thursday, Dec. 14, the students at MES came in wearing their most festive holiday attire and collected 61 pairs of slippers and 383 toiletry items that were delivered to the Hartford Armory in time for the holidays. Pictured from back left are Ava Machowski, Ben Spencer, Molly Paquette and Emily Mosher and, in front, Ellie Kamienski and Jacob Coates.

Santa Takes Tour Through Belltown

by Elizabeth Regan

The first time East Hampton residents Traci and Paul Howland saw Santa Claus arrive in their neighborhood on a firetruck, it was just the two of them in their Tarragon Drive home.

"We were like, 'This is amazing! We can't wait to have kids,'" Traci recounted Tuesday night as Claus made his annual trek through the Spice Hill enclave.

Now their children are 10 and 12 years old. "It's why we had them," Paul joked.

Santa Claus has been coming to town with his firefighting escorts for 15 years, according to current organizer Fred Royce. The department now covers roughly 180 of the town's 240 streets over 11 days.

The Howland kids never want to miss Claus's arrival, according to their mother.

"It's so magical," Traci said.

Holiday tunes blared from a reserve fire truck bedecked with multi-colored Christmas bulbs and flashing emergency lights. The cacophony of sight and sound lured residents out from their homes to stand at the end of their driveways for a chance to meet the Jolly Ol' Elf.

Zackary Howland, the couple's youngest child, said the tradition is an awesome way to celebrate holiday spirit.

"Me personally, I like telling my secrets to Santa," Zackary said.

After confirming that his secrets were of the What-I-Want-For-Christmas variety, Zackary declined to comment about what he divulged to Claus during their brief meeting.

East Hampton Volunteer Fire Department public information officer James Burke said the volunteers have more fun than the residents they visit.

"The charge of it is to see the faces on these little kids," he said.

It's also a chance to interact with the community under happy, laid-back conditions.

"Let's face it: When somebody dials 911, they're not having a good day," he said.

So showing up with Claus gives firefighters a chance to "mix and mingle" with residents who may have questions about what the department does or needs, according to Burke.

"Over the last couple of years, we've purchased some new equipment, and people have questions," he explained. "The stuff's expensive – \$800,000, \$900,000 – and they're the ones who are going to have to pay for it. So we get out, explain what's going on."

Most recently, the Town Council approved the purchase of an \$805,000 aerial ladder truck that arrived in April of this year. That's not what was transporting Claus this year, though. The honor was given to one of the department's older reserve trucks.

Burke said the simplicity of the holiday outreach effort is the best part about it. While the organizational aspect of planning the routes can take a good amount of work, the rest is simply about grabbing a few firefighters, a few junior members, some candy canes and Claus – and hitting the road.

Burke said that on at least one occasion in prior years, Claus's escort has been called out to an emergency "with the lights on it, and with Santa Claus in it."

The emergency turned out to be a false alarm, he added.

This year, the "sleigh" experienced some
See Santa Takes Tour page 28

Old Mr. Kringle is Soon Gonna Jingle

It's that time of year again. Kids throughout the *Rivereast* area – indeed, throughout the world – have made their wish lists detailing what they want from Santa Claus when he goes flying through the sky.

To help the big guy figure out what local girls and boys want, Hebron/Marlborough Girl Scout Troop 65537 has spent the past few weeks collecting letters to Santa. Wish lists came not just from those two towns but also Andover, Colchester, East Hampton and Columbia.

As they often do, the Girl Scouts let us see the letters before sending them up north. And as we often do, we found the letters pretty delightful. So, we included a sampling of them here. All the cute little kid misspellings were left in on purpose; we feel they only add to the letters' charm.

So, without further ado, here are some of what kids are asking for in Christmas 2017. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from all of us at the *Rivereast*.

Dear Santa,

How are you? I hope things are going well in the North Pole. This Christmas, I would like an Instax camera please. I love polaroid cameras! I have an Elf on the Shelf named Jingle. I'm really excited for the holidays and looking forward to Christmas! I enjoy spending time with friends and family during the most wonderful time of the year. I wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Happy Holidays, Sophia

Dear Santa,

The nicest thing I did this year was give my best friend Grant lots of hugs. This year I have been nice. A few nice things I would like to get this year are, laser beamer, Nerf gun, mobil crane, excavator I can ride, doritos, and a Paw Patrol please. And a lightup laser beamer for my friend Grant. Be sure to look on the fireplace for the carrots and the cookies with milk that I'll leave for you and the reindeer!

Love your friend,
Jack

Dear Santa

How are things at the North Pole? We're fine in Marlborough. You must be having a lot of Mrs. Claus cookies and hot chocolate. Here are Mrs. Claus and the Reindeer, the elfs and yourself? I don't need a lot for Christmas. I would like you to surprise me. You must be very busy. Thank you for the presents in the previous years. You get what I want every year. I'm singing a lot of Christmas carols. Our first big snow was today! Merry Christmas!

Love, Stella



See Santa Letters page 28



Santa Claus, center, was flanked by, from left, Tess Parmalee, Charlotte Cascio, Avery Parmalee and Emily Tinson in their Spice Hill neighborhood Tuesday night as the Jolly Ol' Elf made one of his last stops on an 11-day journey through East Hampton. Claus was escorted by the East Hampton Volunteer Fire Department.

Santa Takes Tour cont. from Front Page

technical difficulties in the middle of one of the Santa Runs.

"The truck broke down, and we had to tow it in a snowstorm," Royce said. But mechanics got it back up and running by noon the next day.

That neighborhood, as well as the Spice Hill section of town, were both rescheduled to what turned out to be a balmy Tuesday night this week.

Tarragon Road resident Carla Correia waited with her children Olivia, 8, and Matthew, 11.

"We think this is incredible," she said. "We love and appreciate that the volunteers give so much of their time to make the kids so happy every year. I get almost emotional over it. I really do."

She recalled the frosty evenings when her children, who were even younger then, would sit inside the front window just waiting for Claus.

This year, the kids weren't kept inside by the cold as they waited.

Matthew said he was most eager for this year's opportunity to tell Claus the number one item on his wish list: A Rob Gronkowski football jersey.

For Olivia, it was a Lego ski lodge set. Throughout the neighborhood, kids of all

ages stood to catch a glimpse of Claus and tell him their wishes for the season.

In one upstairs window, a child could be seen looking out as the truck stopped in front of his house, flashing lights and blaring "Let it Snow." Maybe he thought he was too old to come out.

At street level, Burke drove the squad truck behind Claus's "sleigh," honking out the beginning of "Jingle Bells" as the crew headed for the next stop.

"I can play that and the first two bars of the 'Hallelujah Chorus,'" he said. "That's all I've got."

The longtime fire department member said he has been committed to the Santa Runs for many years, since he first saw a preschooler standing with his parents on the side of the street as Claus pulled up.

"He was in absolute awe because Santa was coming to his house. I wish I had it on film. As we got closer, he was so excited he began to shake," Burke said.

With Burke's four children and eight grandchildren scattered around the country, Burke said he doesn't get to see that same sense of wonder in the eyes of his own family.

"This is my Christmas," he volunteered.

Santa Letters cont. from Front Page

Dear Santa

I have tried my best to be good this year. I have made a few mistakes, but I think I have been forgiven.

This year I would like a Barbie Dream Horse, a fingerling, and a pikme pop please.

Love Grace

p.s. I will put out some cookies and milk for you! Merry Christmas!

Dear Santa

This year I have been a good boy. I know how hard all your elves work to make toys for all the good boys and girls. I want to say thank-you. I know you have been watching me so I hope you can make it to my house this year.

From Kayden

Dear Santa

I hope you and Mrs. Claus are good. I know you are busy and want to know I've been really good this year. I really want a guitar but I will enjoy anything else if you can't get me a guitar.

From Alexis

Dear Santa,

I've been soooo good this year! Here are a few things I'm wishing for ...

A Nintendo Switch, a modulus regulator, a mega mastodon, ant box The rest well, I leaving that up to you.

From a great kid named Jack

Dear Santa,

I have good boy can you please give me the following: the bike from toyRus and cozmo by Anki. If you get me things I will do good in school.

Love, William

Dear Santa,

I have been good this year. I help feed the dogs every day. I want a lava lamp, doll, clothes, and a new backpack. I will leave food for the reindeer.

Love Colleen

Dear Santa Clause,

I like you so much. I hope the cookies are good. I would like remote control bumper cars, a kitchen set and Blaze monster truck water thing. My brother Caleb would like a Mickey chair. I hope your elves tell you jokes. Ho Ho Ho! Merry Christmas!

Love, Connor, age 4

Dear Santa,

I am sorry Snowflake (elf on the shelf)

Please come back and we will not touch you.

I promise

Love, Addison

Dear Santa

May I have 6 elvs tomorrow for my mom, Dad, my brother and me and my cat and dog and I want a guinea pig for christmas this year

I can't wait to site on your lap and ask you what I want for christmas my guinea pig past a way and I miss him.

Sophie

Dear Santa and Mrs. Clause

It's been a while since I've seen you! how are you and your reindeer? I hope your doing well! I'm so excited for Christmas one of the reasons is that last year I got a new Christmas tree and the lights change color! I've been thinking that these are some of the things I would like Spot the zoomer zuppy interactive puppy, Princess castle play tent pink, mermaid tale, crayola sketcher projector, that the animals get shelter.

Please write back

Love, Rian

P.S. What is Mrs. Clauses favorite type of cookie?

Dear, Santa

I will give you some ideas for Christmas here I go... 1. I would Like Barbie Stuff 2. Leah Clark a Amarican girl doll 3. Bath Boam Kit. 4. Unicorn Slime gloop kit 5. Glow in the dark Fairy Terrarium 6. Paint and display Glitter plaster Horses. 7. Double hachamal Surprise 8. My Life mini livig room set. 9 a castal for my fish 10. Fairy garden supplies 11. A husky puppy 11. art supplies 12. Lego firends SunShine Catamran 13. Barbie drem House 14. Sinsinse kit 15. New basket ball 16. Zip line 17. New Cute long sleeve shirts 18. pants 19. Ski gaket these are my I deas for Chirtmas

Love: Carly

P.S. Give Rhodph a hug

Dear Santa,

As you know this is my 10th Christmas and I've done a lot of cool stuff this year like got into ECE, got into student council, etc. This year I want you to not tell Mommy, Daddy, or my brother what is on my list. There's one REALLY big thing I want. Enough gibber jabber to my list! 1. Some bows 2. The big thing are you ready? The REALLY big things is a puppy! Thank you so much for reading my letter! Hope it didn't waste your precious busy time!

Grace

P.S. Merry Christmas!

Dear Santa,

For Christmas this year I would only like one thing and can that be a Babyalive blond sweet tears but if you can't get it I would like a american girdoll food set, not eny Peticular but I f not seen that's ok all I would like is to hang out with the family

Payton

\$11.70 Million School Budget Proposed for Hebron

by Sloan Brewster

Hebron Superintendent of Schools Timothy Van Tassel is proposing an \$11.70 million spending package for the next school year – a maintenance budget that calls for several staffing reductions.

At the Dec. 14 meeting of the Board of Education, Van Tassel gave an introductory overview of his 2018-19 budget, which would be a \$108,474 increase, or .94 percent, over current year spending.

The spending proposal “represents the needs of the students but is also very cognitive of the budget in the state of Connecticut,” Van Tassel told the school board. “Keep in mind our work just begins tonight.”

The proposed increase does not bring in any new staff or programs but rather is driven by negotiated wage and benefit increases and a potential 8 percent increase in the costs for the Region 8 Health Insurance Consortium.

“We must do more with less,” Van Tassel said. Van Tassel applauded the negotiations that led to the wage increases for the collective bargaining units, thanking all involved for coming to agreements without needing arbitration.

Based on those agreements, teachers will get raises of 1.55 percent in the 2018-19 year, administrators will get 2.00 percent hikes, non-certified staff will see 2.25 percent increases

and nonaffiliated staff will get 2.25 percent raises.

The proposal also included proposed personnel reductions due to reorganization.

“Several of these reduced positions may result in unemployment costs,” Van Tassel said.

Whenever possible, he said, the cuts would be made through attrition, consolidation or when a staff member is going to leave anyway. The proposed cuts include a data specialist, a part-time teacher, one part-time and five full-time paraprofessionals and a part-time office secretary.

Most of the paraprofessionals Van Tassel proposed cutting are already empty, he said. The part-time secretarial position is also an unfilled empty slot.

And the plan is to just keep those empty.

“We are in unprecedented [fiscal] times right now,” Van Tassel said.

Had the proposal come with no reductions or changes in staff, it would have been a 3 percent increase, Van Tassel said.

Van Tassel also included an enrollment report in the presentation. There are currently 701 students in local schools, which is an increase over projections, he said.

“It was anticipated that we would experience a decrease of 40 students; however, an unex-

pected increase in our kindergarten enrollment resulted in a decline of only two students,” he said.

The numbers will continue to rise based on families who have informed the district they are moving to town, he said.

“By the end of December, we will have 710 students in this school district,” he said.

For a number of years in the past decade, the school budget has had low and zero percent increases as well as decreases, according to the 10-year budget history Van Tassel included in the presentation. In 2010-11 and 2015-16, there were no increases. In 2011-12, 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15, increases were less than 1 percent. In 2016-17 and 2017-18 the budgets were reductions.

“At some point in time, you’re not going to be able to see the decreases that you’ve been seeing,” Van Tassel said.

Van Tassel’s presentation also included a show-and-tell of a brand-new budget format. The thick binder is more reader-friendly and includes a section of frequently asked questions.

“I’ve taken those frequently asked questions and uploaded them for this year,” he said.

Questions included per-pupil-expenditures and legislative mandates and their costs.

The district spends \$15,999 per student, Van

Tassel said. He included a comparison of similar districts. Mansfield spends \$18,949, Andover spends \$18,796, Willington spends \$18,604 and Marlborough spends \$14,080.

The list of mandates for which the district must set aside funding includes special education, research based interventions, magnet school tuitions, teacher evaluations, and Smarter Balanced Assessments, he said. All told, the mandates he listed cost the town \$2.4 million.

Toward the end of his presentation, Van Tassel additionally talked about special education and Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) funding to the town. He said he can’t guess how much they will lose in 2018-19.

Board of Finance Chairman Malcolm Leichter, the board’s liaison to the Board of Education, noted that on the general government side as well, officials are grappling with how to deal with shortfalls from the state.

“It’s the same thing we’re going through as a board with all the cuts and not sure where we’re going to land,” he said.

Board of Finance Vice Chairman David Veschi, who was also in attendance at the meeting, summed things up by saying, “It’s not pretty for anybody,” he said.

Andover Lego Team Makes it to State Championships

by Sloan Brewster

Andover Elementary School rocked the FIRST Lego League Challenge.

It was the second year in a row the team earned a spot in the state championship.

In November, a team of students in grades five and six attended the East of the River FIRST Lego League (FLL) Tournament at Tolland High School, where the Andover students received the highest score for their robot, Principal John Briody told the crowd gathered at the Dec. 13 Board of Education meeting.

“These students are in elementary school, most of the [other competitors] are in middle school,” Laura Bush, a teacher at Andover Elementary and a coach for the team, said at the board meeting. “We’re little Andover in our little elementary school and we literally rocked it.”

The team did well at the state championship on Dec. 2, but did not place.

On Tuesday, members of the Andover team met for lunch in Jaime Webber’s classroom and talked about their winning project. Webber, a teacher at the school, joined Bush in coaching the team, as did Bush’s son Travis Bush, who competed in the challenge when he was a child and volunteered to pitch in this year.

There were three components to the competition, according to Webber. For the robotics portion, students built a robot and programmed it to perform specific tasks as it traversed a large paper mat depicting a blueprint of an imaginary city.

Despite technical challenges with their robot, the team still raked in the points, students said.

“For the robot game, we got the highest-scoring point out of everyone,” said sixth-grader Maxim Grenier.

The project portion required the kids to identify a problem within a specific theme and then come up with an innovative solution.

“Hydrodynamics was the big theme of what we had to do and we had to work together to create a project,” sixth-grader Brody Kopp said. “We decided to make a floating island so it fil-

ters out all the nitrogen and phosphorous in lakes and ponds.”

Nitrogen and phosphorous cause growths of blue-green algae, which the island filtration system is meant to prevent, said sixth-grader Alexa Burke.

“It was closing swimming areas and it’s really bad for lakes and rivers,” Alexa said.

The team researched the algae, hunting for potential solutions, and initially planned a different one. Susan Quincy, Project WET (Water Education for Teachers) coordinator for State Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, who came to the school to talk about the project, explained to the team that its fix could lead to unintended consequences, the students said.

“Susan Quincy said the tubes would get clogged and the temperature change could harm the fish so we changed the idea to the floating island,” Paul Thomas, fifth-grader, said.

The students didn’t merely go for the idea of the floating island, though – they improved upon it, Webber said.

They made it better by putting a tube around the island to keep the water moving because still water also leads to the algae, the students said. They also added some plants around the island to help filter the water.

The team also competed on core values. “Core values is working together as a team,” said Maxim.

The team had to show leadership, perseverance, cooperation and gracious professionalism, he explained.

In practicing for the core values part of the competition, team members worked together using strings and rubber bands to grasp and move a cup, Maxim said. At the completion, they had to throw a ball, making sure each member touched it at least once and that the last person tossed it into a box.

The group was mixed as to whether they expected to make it to the state competition.

Eliza Erami, fifth-grader, said he had his doubts because testing before the competition



At the Dec. 13 Board of Education meeting, Max Grenier, Eliza Erami and Alexa Burke (pictured from left) demonstrate the robot the Andover Elementary School built for the FIRST Lego Challenge.

didn’t go as well as the group hoped.

Brody, though, said he was confident his team would make it to states.

“I thought we would because it was the same robot we had last year, same design and we had very intelligent teachers that helped us learn and taught us and I was very confident that we

would get a lot of points and score really high,” he said.

While the team didn’t win a spot on the podium, Webber said it was still a good experience.

“We made it to states,” she said. “We’re kind of happy with that.”

Selectmen Aim to Buy More of Portland Riverfront

by Elizabeth Regan

Building on the success of a public/private partnership that has already revitalized parts of Brownstone Avenue, selectmen are hoping to purchase additional property on the riverfront.

The Board of Selectmen has endorsed a plan to purchase three parcels of contaminated land 222, 230 and 248 Brownstone Ave. The 5.28-acre property was a petroleum storage and distribution site before it was vacated in 2010.

The town in 2016 received a \$750,000 grant for the full cost of remediation, contingent on the purchase of the property.

Selectmen voted unanimously on Dec. 6 to send the proposal to the Planning and Zoning Commission as required by state statute.

The proposal must be approved by the Planning and Zoning Commission and then by the public at a town meeting before the town can make a deal.

Concept plans for the \$3.78 million riverfront revitalization outlined in the grant application include a 5,000-square-foot restaurant and 1,500-square-foot brownstone museum with expanded parking for Riverfront Park and the Brownstone Exploration and Discovery Park.

The museum and restaurant were estimated in the grant to cost approximately \$3 million, with the bulk of the remaining costs attributed to remediation fees.

The grant estimated the cost to the town would be about \$330,000, not including the purchase price. The amount covers construction costs, soft costs and legal fees.

First Selectwoman Susan Bransfield said this week the local contribution was an extremely rough estimate that she hopes will be lessened by grants and private investment.

The town intends to apply for tourism and historic preservation grants to fund at least part of the construction of the brownstone museum, according to the grant. Construction and operation costs for the restaurant would come from a private developer.

The museum would be run by a nonprofit organization like the historical society, according to Bransfield.

"This is an intention to not only improve the economic climate there and help us get more revenue, but it's also cleaning up the environment and leveraging our already substantial investment in this area. And it's proven to be viable," Bransfield said.

She said the town receives approximately \$400,000 annually in lease fees from the Brownstone Exploration and Discovery Park.

Bransfield said the proposed purchase would

be likely funded through a loan, which would be paid for through the general fund.

She would not divulge the town's offer because it's not yet final.

She said the owners are asking \$835,000 in total.

"I can tell you that's not what we offered, by any stretch," she added.

Selectmen have been meeting in executive session for over a year to discuss negotiations with O,R&L Commercial, the brokerage firm representing the estates of owners John and Rose Balletti.

It was negotiations with the seller that prolonged the process, according to Bransfield. She said she brought what she believed was a final number to the previous Board of Selectmen prior to the November election, but members decided to hold off on a vote.

It's not unusual for an outgoing board to leave big decisions up to the members who will be overseeing the results for the next two years, she said.

Former Democratic selectmen Fred Knous and Kathy Richards did not run for re-election, while Republican Kitch Breen Czernicki lost her seat.

Newcomers to the board are Democrats Ralph Zampano and Lou Pear as well as Republican Rick Sharr.

Republican Michael Pelton, a returning Republican selectman, said this week he's enthusiastic about the proposal.

"Portland has the most riverfront of any town in Connecticut, and anything that gets more public use out of it is better," he said.

The new opportunities will enhance improvements that have already taken place in the area with a focus on both green space and economic development, according to Pelton.

The town purchased a 40-acre swath of riverfront property and the adjacent quarries in 1999 for \$1.05 million. The popular Brownstone Exploration and Discovery Park leases the quarry side, and paid \$468,932 in fees to the town in the 2016-17 fiscal year. Bransfield said the business has paid the town approximately \$2.75 million in fees since the park opened in 2005.

The town-owned riverside is now home to a park, including a performance stage and a picnic pavilion.

Pelton acknowledged some concern among members of the previous board that it might not be the best time to make a big purchase, considering a precarious state budget situation that has led to a cut in state funding to towns.



Empty petroleum tanks loom over abandoned Brownstone Avenue land that the Board of Selectmen wants to purchase for an as-yet undisclosed sum. The town is considering redeveloping the contaminated 5.28-acre property with a combination of local, state, nonprofit and private funding.

"I think timing-wise, it could look bad; but in actuality it's something that has been planned for a long time," he said.

Based on what he described as a "reasonable" sales price, Pelton said he is confident the town can afford the property.

Bransfield said the \$750,000 environmental cleanup grant from the Department of Economic and Community Development is still ready and waiting, despite recent cuts to other state funding streams.

A separate grant for \$200,000 received in 2014 covered three phases of environmental assessment to determine the extent of the contamination from industrial activity going back to the middle of the last century.

The most recent assessment report from the engineering firm Tighe and Bond, released in April, confirmed the \$750,000 cost estimate for remediation efforts is still accurate. The report cited an accuracy range of +40 percent and -25 percent.

The firm found that roughly 10,000 cubic yards of petroleum-contaminated soil will need to be remediated, possibly by capping the soil with asphalt parking areas or structures that may be part of a new development. About 1,500 cubic yards will need to be removed from the site due to contamination by PCBs or other sig-

nificant environmental hazards, the report said.

Groundwater remediation will likely be needed as well, according to the report. The firm said work could be accomplished through natural attenuation, which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency defines as natural biological, chemical, and physical processes used to treat contaminants.

Future use of the site would likely be restricted to commercial or industrial only. The environmental land use restriction is a method employed by the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection to minimize the risk of human exposure to pollutants and environmental hazards by preventing specific uses or activities at a property, according to the DEEP.

The Planning and Zoning Commission was set to review the proposal at its meeting Thursday, after press time.

State statute said the commission is required to make a recommendation to selectmen within 35 days. The commission's report is advisory and can be overturned by a majority of the members at a town meeting.

Town charter specifies any real estate transaction over \$10,000 must be approved by voters at a town meeting. Any loan in excess of \$500,000 must go to a referendum.

New Novel Based on Experiences in Portland Government

by Elizabeth Regan

It almost reads like the pages of the Portland section of the *Riverast News Bulletin* these last few years: An out-of-towner proposes a new development and irate residents tell him where to shove it.

But the inspiration for Frank B. Connolly's self-published novel, *Hidden Agendas: Inside Town Hall*, didn't come from the town he's lived in for more than a decade. It came from 25 years of experience as the chief executive officer in Coventry, Newington and North Branford.

The three towns serve as the basis for the fictional town of Covingford. That's where Connolly introduces readers to a heated town meeting during which residents excoriate the businessman who wants to build a shopping center adjacent to a residential neighborhood.

The book's synopsis teases more plot details that may be familiar to Portland readers: "As a result of the proposal, the citizens of Covingford become split into bitter factions and experience a crash course on the murky world of local politics."

There's even an intrepid female reporter who, according to Connolly, "provides keen insight into the many political shenanigans as she shines light on several hidden agendas."

Connolly, 75, said anyone who has worked in a town hall, served on a local board or simply attended a town meeting will find familiar

personalities in the pages of his book.

He's been taking notes for 20 years in preparation for the book, he said.

"My whole career has been local government," he explained. "Hundreds and hundreds of night meetings and weekend meetings and day meetings. Over the years, certain things stick out: people, locations, events, issues. You take a little bit here, a little bit there. It's a blend."

Then, he added, "you embellish."

The imaginative arc of his first self-published novel is a departure from his last book. *Local Government in Connecticut*, now in its third edition, first came out in 1992 as a textbook for public officials and students looking to better understand how the state's 169 municipalities are operated.

He said it was more difficult to devise an interesting plot about local government than it was to research the textbook.

It's too soon to say if he's got another novel in him, though.

"It was something on my bucket list I wanted to check off, and I got it done," Connolly hedged.

With a master's degree in city planning and public administration from the University of Virginia, Connolly went on to work as a town planner before becoming the Coventry town manager. He served for 10 years before mov-

ing to Newington, where he worked for five years as assistant town manager and another five as town manager. He finished out his career with a 10-year stint as town manager in North Branford.

In retirement, he works as an interim business manager in board of education offices across the state. He is an adjunct faculty member in the public administration program at the University of New Haven.

Connolly and his wife, Terri, have five children. The couple will soon be celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary.

He credited Terri with helping him through the writing process by proofreading, encouraging him and generally keeping him "on the straight and narrow."

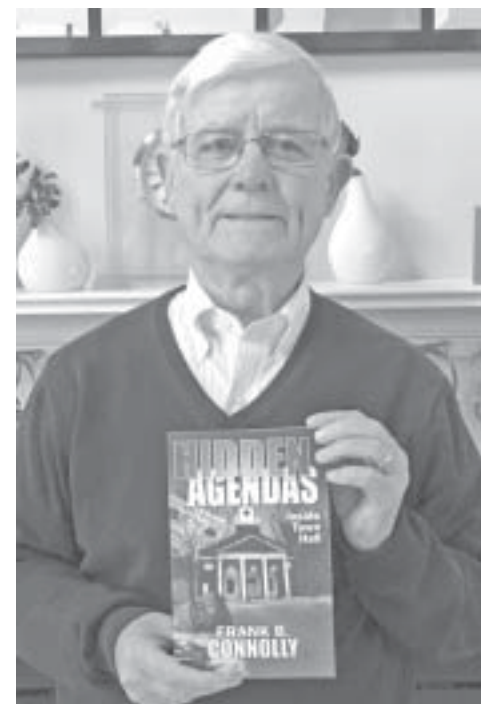
Ray Poet, a neighbor in the over-55 community where Connolly has lived since retiring, offered critical assistance to address a gaping hole in the plot.

"I couldn't figure out how to end it," Connolly said.

He and Poet bounced ideas off each other for many hours until they arrived at the conclusion: a turn of events that surprised the author and, he said, promises to surprise the reader.

* * *

Hidden Agendas: Inside Town Hall by Frank B. Connolly is available in print and as an e-book on Amazon.com.



Similarities between Portland and the fictional town in Frank Connolly's new book *Hidden Agendas* are purely coincidental.

RHAM School Board to Charge for Parking

by Sloan Brewster

Faced with a deficit of more than \$330,000, the RHAM Board of Education is trying to raise some revenue.

At its meeting Monday, the school board gave Superintendent of Schools Patricia Law authorization to charge students for parking.

Starting in January, students will be charged \$50 per semester, or \$100 for the entire year, with the expectation of raising \$12,300 between January and June 2018 for the 246 cars expected to park in the campus lot or at the veteran's park across the street.

Caitlin Leahy, student representative to the board, voiced opinions from some students on the parking charge.

"Some people understand parking is a privilege," she said.

But, she said, other students pay for their own gas and car insurance, and feel having to pay for parking would be an additional burden.

"It may reduce the number of students who drive themselves to school," she said.

Judy Benson Clarke said she agreed with Leahy's concern – and said everyone needs to work together to fill the funding gaps.

"This is a difficult, difficult budget in times like we've never seen before," she said.

Board member Carole Shea, however, had a different take.

If the students don't drive themselves to school, they would take the bus, thus would not be paying for gas and would save money, she said. They would also fill empty seats on buses, which the district has to pay for regardless of whether or not anyone uses them.

"Maybe this would increase bus ridership," she said.

Board member Sue Rapelye pointed out that RHAM was one of the sole school districts that does not charge for parking.

"I do feel like this is a fair amount," she said. "We didn't start at \$125 per semester."

Ultimately, the board voted 7-0 with two absentions – Clarke and Kathleen Goodwin abstained – to give Law the go-ahead to start the parking fee.

Law also recommended an increase in the Pay-to-Participate fees students are charged at the high school. Currently at \$185 per year, Law suggested increasing the amount to \$185 per sport per season for the 2018-19 school year, with a \$500 cap per athlete.

The board did not act on this recommendation, however, and Law said she would include

a more detailed plan in her formal budget presentation.

Law also said she was working with principals and teachers on the idea of using furlough days for professional development days. If every teacher used two furlough days, she said, there would be a net savings of approximately \$139,000.

The district is also saving money through a budget freeze, Law said.

Board member Amy D'Amaddio asked her specifically how much money would be saved via the freeze, but Law replied the number was still unknown as there were still unanticipated expenses the school system may have to grapple with during the school year.

Some board members expressed concern that funds were being frozen on educational needs but business manager Jane Neel, in her report, clarified the freeze included purchases for such items as general supplies and things not happening.

"Anything that has to do with education or the students goes through, anything that has to do with safety and repair is allowed," she said.

The district is running a deficit due to re-

ductions in state funding and to an accounting adjustment, Law said in a meeting Dec. 10. It had expected \$608,444 in the Excess Cost Grant for outplacement tuitions for special needs students, but Law changed the projection to \$443,446, the same amount it received last year.

"To be fiscally prudent in our accounting, at this point making this adjustment I think is important," she said. "We haven't historically gotten the number we projected in our costs."

In addition to adjusting for less Excess Cost Grant funding, the school system is also dealing with further state cuts, including in the Educational Cost Sharing grant, and such unanticipated costs as repairs to moisture-damaged flooring.

All told, the total deficit, as of Nov. 30, is \$336,287, Law said.

"One of the things that I am concerned about is the fact that it continues to be a focus on special education," Law said. "It's not the only issue that we're dealing with as a district."

Other issues include insurance cost, pupil transportation and maintenance.

"The flooring will cost several thousands of dollars that we haven't budgeted for," she said.

East Hampton School Spending Freeze Enacted

by Elizabeth Regan

The East Hampton school district is under a spending freeze due to increased special education costs.

Board of Education member Joanne Barmasse told fellow board members at Monday's regular meeting that additional outplacements and associated transportation costs have spurred the increase.

"Things are getting a little tight," she said.

School business manager Karen Asetta said this week that the number of special education students taught outside the district is expected to rise to 14 students by February, which is five more than school officials budgeted for.

Students whose needs can't be met in town must be placed in an appropriate program outside the district.

Superintendent of Schools Paul K. Smith put the increase at an estimated \$200,000 for the additional outplacements and roughly \$100,000 for transportation.

Each school will halt the purchase of mate-

rials and supplies and will institute a "small hiring freeze" for positions such as classroom aides, according to Smith.

"Our goal is to be very cautious moving forward," he said.

He added that no students would be going "without essentials" due to the spending freeze.

The superintendent emphasized special education figures can fluctuate throughout the year. Asetta said there were 11 outplaced students in 2015 and 2016 based on Oct. 1 numbers.

"In December of 2016, they had declined to nine and the budget for 2017-18 was built with this optimistic number, as 20/20 hindsight now shows," she said.

According to the current \$30.05 million education budget, \$297,414 was allocated for outplacement tuition. That's compared to \$424,454 allocated in the previous fiscal year.

Smith said he drafts each new budget proposal based on the number of students who are

outplaced at the time, instead of padding it for possible increases.

"We are literally budgeting per student," he said.

He puts together his budgets at the end of each year for presentation to the Board of Education in January. The budget is typically approved by voters in the late spring.

Smith said he expects Medicaid reimbursement to offset some of the cost, but will not have specific figures until early spring.

Asetta said there are a variety of reasons for outplacement.

"Each student's diagnosis is unique and complex," she said.

The district this year implemented the Supportive Teaching for At-Risk Students (STARS) program with the goal of keeping more special education students in the district. The framework is currently in place in Memorial School and Center School.

The program is designed to create a therapeutic environment in each building to meet special education students' needs so they can remain in – or return to – school with their peers.

Existing staff positions were reassigned so the program would not result in increased staffing costs, according to budget documents.

Smith said the freeze is not related to funding cuts from the state.

East Hampton Town Manager Michael Maniscalco said earlier this month the town is prepared to manage a \$1.27 million reduction in municipal aid compared to last year.

He said the reduction in funding from the state will be mitigated by a .44 mill increase already assessed to taxpayers in anticipation of the cut. The tax increase adds about \$495,000 to the town's bottom line.

Maniscalco said he also expects up to \$700,000 in back taxes the town is aggressively pursuing in the form of a tax sale.

Colchester's Levine Named Phys Ed Teacher of Year

by Julianna Roche

Becoming a physical education teacher was never Don Levine's original plan, but following a real estate market crash in the late 1980s, he was forced into closing his own office and making a career leap that would change his life forever.

Levine – who also served as Colchester's first Parks and Recreation director, from 1980-84 – recalled that one of his former teachers suggested he try teaching.

Holding a bachelor's degree in health and physical education, he was ultimately hired in 1989 as a health and physical education teacher for kindergarten through fifth grade students at what was then called Jack Jackter Elementary School and continued his teaching career at Colchester Elementary School, which was built specifically for students in preschool through second grade in 2006.

Twenty-nine years and one master's degree in integrated early childhood and special education later, Levine was honored last month by the Connecticut Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (CTAHPERD) as Elementary School Physical Education Teacher of the Year.

"I've found my niche and I love every bit of it," Levine said this week.

"It's not easy every day, but I get a lot out of guiding them [the students]," he continued, adding that his physical education classes focus on everything from developing basic motor skills to balance activities, "foot eye skills," cooperative activity games, and even health lessons.

"It's teaching them basic skills they need if

they want to get into a sport they can do for future years, but also lifetime activities," Levine explained, adding that another part of his job is collaborating with the CES Behavior Team to help build lagging skills for children who might be struggling in emotional or social areas.

According to a letter to CTAHPERD recommending Levine for the award, CES Principal Judy O'Meara wrote that he "strives to create a classroom environment where all students can be successful."

O'Meara added that Levine is "a lifelong learner" who is "passionate about creating and sharing learning opportunities with others."

Among those learning opportunities, Levine has coordinated and facilitated regional professional development for over 100 health and physical education teachers in his area – which has included presenting various workshops within his own school system focusing primarily on technology. He also spends many nights and weekends as an announcer and scorekeeper at various sporting events in the community and for the last 24 years has raised funds and supported the American Heart Association (AHA) through the Jump Rope for Heart program.

Levine explained that several years after he began teaching in 1993, he thought that bringing the program to Colchester would be "a good way" to honor his father who passed away from heart disease years prior.

"For 21 years, my goal was to [raise] \$10,000," he said, noting that it took several years to reach, but with every benchmark hit, he would increase the goal the following year.

This year, Levine had his most successful fundraiser to date – raising \$25,413 for the

AHA, marking CES as the school with the second-highest amount raised in the state.

He explained the feat would not have been possible without "the community of Colchester, all the parents and all the kids."

Despite his many accolades, Levine said his biggest accomplishment is simply "seeing the smiles of every kid that comes in here."

"It's the little memories of helping a kid from the lowest level [of school] on up to the highest level," he added. "I always treat everybody equally and want them all to do their best."

Levine is also known in the school district for implementing 21st century teaching and learning techniques, such as through ClassDojo – a communication app which allows students, parents, and teachers to share in the classroom experience by posting videos or photos to their portfolios, and measuring student behavior.

Second grade CES teacher Stephanie DeGaetano also wrote in a recommendation letter that Levine is very active on social media, constantly tweeting about his personal fitness goals, sharing morning workout routines with students and staff, and blogging.

"He is a continual learner, seeking out professional development opportunities that will help him continue to be an innovative teacher," she said. "Likewise, he is equally well-respected by colleagues and the community, a valuable resource to many, and a genuinely good person and friend."

"If someone had to describe me [as a gym teacher], I think they'd say I'm easygoing, fun-loving," Levine said, adding that his fun and active style of teaching has earned him the nickname "a kid's kid."



This November, Colchester Elementary School health and gym teacher Don Levine was awarded as Elementary School Physical Education Teacher of the Year by the Connecticut Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.

Indeed, Levine said, he feels the job keeps him young.

"It's because I love what I do," he said. "I love coming to work every day."

Marlborough Mom Saves Camp Harkness with 20,000-Signature Petition

By Julianna Roche

When Heather Dierberger heard that Camp Harkness – the country’s only beachfront camp serving people with disabilities – would be closing as part of a budget plan proposed by Gov. Dannel Malloy in May, she knew she had to do something about it.

The state “did extreme budget cuts in all the wrong places and the special needs community was feeling the brunt of it,” she said, adding that she felt a special connection to Camp Harkness as she and her husband Brian have been taking their 3-year-old son Drew to the camp for the last two years. Drew was born premature with torticollis – which leads to tilting of the head – and developmental delays.

When she learned of the closing, Dierberger “was in shock,” said her husband Brian. “This was our son’s favorite place to go to be himself and enjoy the beautiful shoreline.”

In addition to closing the 102-acre state park located in Waterford, Malloy’s proposed plan also called for the closing of Camp Quinebaug, a similar facility in Killingly – in the hopes it would save the state nearly \$560,000 over the next two fiscal years.

Dierberger explained, however, that Camp Harkness is “extremely unique” to the special needs community in that it provides those with mental or physical disabilities of all ages and their families a welcoming and safe place to enjoy the beach, camping in tents, cabins or cottages, and other special events.

Annually, the state park brings in more than 35,000 visitors and from June to August is visited by more than 1,200 overnight campers. The camp also offers day visits and is used on a regular basis by 106 different groups and agencies.

Following Hurricane Sandy and camp restorations in 2013, Malloy had originally visited the camp to commend it for its services, going on record as saying, “Camp Harkness is a jewel of Connecticut.”

“This is the only beachfront camp for indi-

viduals with disabilities in the country and with FEMA’s help like so many other communities in Connecticut, it has been restored to its original beauty,” he said at the time.

“The federal government allocated FEMA funds as well to preserve [the camp],” Dierberger explained. “They too saw the importance and significance of Camp Harkness to those who need it. How could Governor Malloy so easily negate the needs of his citizens and the feelings of the federal government?”

Feeling the impacts of the camp’s potential closing and wanting to serve as a voice for the special needs community, Dierberger decided to start a petition on change.org. “Keep Camp Harkness Alive,” calling for the camp to remain open – which over the course of just a couple months garnered over 20,000 signatures across the globe from California to Australia and ultimately resulted in the camp being removed from the governor’s list of parks to be defunded.

“I didn’t really know how it was going to go... [but] I would have never in 1,000 years expected it to go that far,” she laughed, adding that she also felt she “didn’t really do anything,” but that it was made possible because of the 20,000 people who supported it.

“It was just such a variety of people who signed it, from people who worked for the Birth to Three agency, to people who work in the school system, to parents of kids with special needs,” she furthered.

Heather “didn’t care if she only got 50 dignitaries,” Brian said. “Little did she know; this petition would go on to raise over 20,000 signatures ... something Gov. Malloy couldn’t ignore.”

As of press time, the petition had a total of 20,319 signatures and continues to climb.

“This was a really important thing for me,” Dierberger said. “I said to my husband if [the camp] closes and we can never go back, I feel like I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night.”

Dierberger was recently honored by the



Thanks to Marlborough resident Heather Dierberger (shown here with husband Brian and son Drew), Camp Harkness in Waterford – the country’s only beachfront camp serving people with disabilities – won’t be closing after all. The camp had been on Gov. Dannel Malloy’s list of state parks to be defunded.

Camp Harkness Advisory Committee, Oak Hill vice president Stan Soby, and the Department of Developmental Services, and was presented with an empowerment award and a state citation signed by state representatives.

“I sometimes feel like the people who don’t have a voice are the people who need the most help,” she said, adding that she hopes people

will continue signing the petition to stand behind the 35,000 families of the special needs community, which sometimes “doesn’t have the reach to share their feelings and experiences.”

For more information or to sign the petition, visit change.org/p/dannell-p-malloy-keep-camp-harkness-alive.

Moody’s Downgrades Marlborough Bond Rating

by Julianna Roche

Following a review by Moody’s Investor Service, which was prompted by the state budget impasse and the potential for a material decrease in state funding to the town, Marlborough has been downgraded from an Aa2 bond rating to Aa3.

In October, Moody’s announced it would be reviewing 26 other municipalities and three school districts across the state – including *Rivereast* towns Colchester and Marlborough, as well as the RHAM school district – for possible rating downgrades.

(As of press time, Colchester’s rating was confirmed at Aa3 and RHAM remains under review. According to Moody’s analyst Nicholas Lehman, a more comprehensive list will be made available to the public in January.)

First Selectwoman Amy Traversa explained this week that while the downgrade is a disappointment, it furthers the town’s resolve “to continue building our reserves, better control our expenditures, and continue to diversify our tax base.”

“Is it a concern of mine? Yes, but there’s very little I can do but continue to lobby the state legislature to get their act together,” she said. “It’s still an above average rating, but it’s still a concern.”

A lower bond rating means the town could see higher interest rates when looking to borrow money for large projects. However, the first selectwoman noted that those types of projects

have been on hold for the time being.

“Marlborough has acted responsibly and taken a conservative approach towards budgeting and expenditures,” she said this week. “We are managing what is in our control, but like so many other towns in Connecticut, the decades of bad decisions made at the capitol have impacted us negatively.”

Board of Finance Chairman Doug Knowlton explained that as long as the town does not go out to bond on projects, the downgrade “doesn’t hurt us.”

“Right now we don’t have anything currently on the horizon to go out for bonding, so this in itself at the moment is not hurting us, but we have to prepare for our future needs,” he furthered.

Traversa also explained that the municipalities most affected by the review are towns that have a predominantly residential base rather than commercial, noting that towns similar to Marlborough – such as Scotland, Coventry, Ledyard and Mansfield – have also been downgraded.

“We recognize that we are in the midst of an unprecedented, multi-year financial storm, and we are doing everything we can to stabilize our financial situation – despite the [state] cuts,” Traversa said, adding that until the state legislature “takes the steps necessary to correct its long-term unfunded obligations and excessive spending, residents in towns like Marlborough

will be impacted.”

The Moody’s credit opinion report – which was issued Dec. 12 – states that the downgrade reflects Marlborough’s “stable though limited financial position” and contributing factors include a limited-size tax base and a need for increased reserves.

“In years past we’ve used the undesignated fund balance to offset increases to the tax rates and everybody patted themselves on the back,” Traversa said. “That’s basically saying ‘I took a loan, and look how well I’m doing.’ You can’t pull it out of savings to use it to make yourself feel better. It’s there for a reason.”

The town’s current undesignated fund balance sits at approximately 8 percent of the town’s \$24.11 million annual budget; however, the Board of Finance is currently developing a formal fund balance policy that targets reserve levels closer to 10 to 12 percent of the annual budget. According to Knowlton, a “healthy” undesignated fund balance is somewhere between 12 and 15 percent according to most auditors.

This week, finance board member Ken Hjulstrom handed credit to Knowlton for raising the issue over the years regarding the low level of Marlborough’s reserves.

“Hopefully overtime we can slowly build up our reserves to a level that will gain us a better rating,” he said this week, adding that he hoped any surplus reported for the 2016-17 fiscal year

might also be added to the reserves “in an attempt to start that process.”

Moody’s credit opinion report lists Marlborough’s strengths as having above average resident wealth and incomes, stable financial operations, and pension liability limited to the state teachers’ retirement system.

“We’ve been working very hard to spur growth in the center of town,” Traversa said, adding that the sewer and water projects which began almost 20 years ago are “beginning to pay off” and the town is seeing more commercial redevelopment projects, such as the Marlborough Tavern Plaza renovation and Big Y project.

“These transactions represent an extraordinary opportunity to grow our future tax revenues and to further diversity from our predominantly residential tax base,” the first selectwoman furthered, adding that over the last 18 months, the town has seen more than \$8.7 million invested in commercial real estate, with several properties currently in the permitting process for redevelopment.

Hjulstrom agreed. “Down the road, I also look forward to growing the commercial tax base,” he said. “The Big Y is the first step and is the result of many years of hard work with changes to our zoning regulations and installation of sewers and a town center water system. I expect other development on the horizon.”

Third Suspect Charged in East Hampton 2015 Home Invasion

by Elizabeth Regan

A Barbados man was the third suspect arrested over the course of two years in the case of a Middle Haddam home invasion during which masked men wielding knives were scared off by an homeowner.

Shane Leendra Lashley, 27, was arrested Dec. 13 on charges of first-degree burglary, conspiracy to commit home invasion, conspiracy to commit first-degree burglary and conspiracy to commit sixth-degree larceny.

A press release from the East Hampton Police Department said Lashley had been a suspect in the case in the case from the beginning, but fled to his home country after an initial interview with law enforcement.

Local police officers were assisted by investigators and attorneys from the Middlesex state's attorney office, the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Marshal Service, according to police.

Lashley was detained by immigration officials in Canada this year and was delivered by the U.S. Marshal Service to the East Hampton Police Department, according to police. They said the Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Administration assisted in transferring Lashley.

Lashley was arraigned the next day at Middlesex Superior Court, police said. State Department of Correction records show he is being held at Hartford Correctional Center on a \$500,000 bond.

Police this week said additional informa-



Shane Lashley

tion could not be released because the court case is sealed.

Details first emerged through an arrest warrant affidavit for William Andre Colton, the first man to be arrested in connection with the crime.

The invasion of the secluded home on Middle Haddam Road occurred Dec. 7, 2015, around 11 p.m., according to the affidavit.

The document said a 73-year-old man witnessed two "ninja like" men making their way up the stairs to the second floor where he and his wife had been sleeping before they were woken by their barking dog. He threw a metal mirror at them and turned to go get his gun from a safe when the two intruders ran out the main entrance.

The couple was not physically harmed, the affidavit said.

Colton was arrested on March 27 and charged with first-degree conspiracy to commit home invasion, first-degree conspiracy to commit burglary, and sixth-degree conspiracy to commit larceny.

Colton is awaiting a jury trial and is next expected in court on Jan. 9, judicial records said.

A third suspect, Steven Maringola of Middletown, was arrested on Oct. 12, 2016. The charges of home invasion, conspiracy to commit home invasion, first-degree burglary and sixth-degree larceny came with a \$1 million bond.

Maringola ultimately pled guilty to misdemeanor charges of first-degree criminal trespass and sixth-degree larceny, according to the state Judicial Branch website. He was granted an unconditional discharge on Nov. 29 of this year.

East Hampton police said they are actively pursuing one more suspect in the case.

East Hampton Police News

12/9: Ashley Porter, 24, of 45 Collie Brook Tr., was issued a summons for traveling unreasonably fast and operating an uninsured motor vehicle, East Hampton Police said.

12/9: Dennis Williams, 34, of 35 Edgewood St., Hartford, was issued a summons for operating a motor vehicle while suspended, police said.

12/11: Korey Bellamy, 31, of 16 Howe St., Meriden, was issued a summons for Failure to Drive Right and Operating an Uninsured Motor Vehicle. Bellamy is scheduled to appear before the Middletown Superior Court on Wednesday, December 20, 2017 at 9:00 a.m. to answer to the aforementioned charges.

12/12: Tyler Galanek, 23, of 7 Hayes Rd., was arrested and charged with second-degree threatening, first-degree reckless endangerment, third-degree assault, carrying a firearm while intoxicated and disorderly conduct, police said.

12/12: Colin Shirshac, 35, of 81 Clark Hill Rd., East Hampton was issued a summons for traveling unreasonably fast, driving while suspended, failure to meet minimum insurance requirements and improper use of a marker plate, police said.

Also, from Dec. 4-10, officers responded to 17 medical calls, nine motor vehicle accidents and seven alarms, and made 25 tr

Colchester Police News

12/7: Colchester Police said David Urban, 42, of 584 Westchester Rd., was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct, third-degree assault, threatening, second-degree reckless endangerment, second-degree strangulation, and first-degree unlawful restraint.

12/16: Colchester Police said at approximately 1:43 p.m., they received a report that an unknown suspect forced entry into a residence on Norwich Avenue through the back-entry door, before entering the victim's bedroom, making face-to-face contact, and subsequently fleeing from the residence. The victim described the individual as a white male in his mid-20s, wearing a black pea coat, black stocking knit cap and black-rimmed glasses. Police said a K-9 track was conducted; however, the case remains under investigation.

Marlborough Police News

12/12: State Police said at approximately 3:21 p.m., they received a report of a burglary from a residence on Hebron Road. Police said that, upon arrival, they found forced entry had been made through a side basement door and several power tool items and a laptop computer were reported missing. According to police, the alleged burglary occurred sometime between 7:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. and the suspect likely parked in the driveway, which is visible from Route 66. Police ask anyone with information regarding the incident to contact Troop K at 860-465-5400 and ask for Trooper Daniel Richman, extension 1366.

From the Editor's Desk

Observations & Ruminations

by Mike Thompson

I thought he was going to hit 100.

As many of you have either heard or saw in last week's *Rivereast*, Hugo DeSarro, East Hampton's poet laureate and a columnist in this paper for more than 30 years, died last week at the age of 98.

I know this sounds odd to say about a man a year and a half away from hitting the century mark, but Hugo's passing came rather suddenly. When I returned from vacation after Thanksgiving, I learned Hugo had entered the hospital – and that it didn't look good. I was shocked – which is also something I know seems a little strange to say given Hugo's age. But Hugo's spirit seemed to belie his years.

I remember last year reporter Elizabeth Regan interviewed Hugo about his new book of poetry, *Stone Steps and Other Poems*. After meeting with him, and talking with him, she was shocked to learn he was just a few months shy of his 97th birthday at the time. He had an energy about him. In addition to having just published a book of poems, Hugo was conducting poetry readings, playing piano for the folks at the East Hampton Senior Center – and submitting his "A Point of View" column each week.

Hugo had been writing the column since at least the mid-1980s, and maybe even a little earlier. I've heard stories that he used to come in each week and drop off his column, for the typesetters then to place. But that was long before I started; by the time I took over as editor in 2007, with the digital age very much upon us, Hugo was emailing in his column every week.

I very much enjoyed it when his column would make its way across my computer screen. Hugo would write about a variety of subjects, but my favorites were always the ones that dealt with nature. More than once over the past 10 years I'd be having a rather gloomy, stressful day and I would come across Hugo's gentle observations about a squirrel in his backyard, or a bird perched on the limb of a tree, and a smile would form on my face.

Hugo had a way of writing about animals that was charming. The way he described

simple life scenes painted a wonderful picture and, indeed, transported you there. His observations could sometimes make you realize how much you'd taken for granted; make you see how much you hadn't seen. It's important to take the time to appreciate the simple wonders of life. I can forget this occasionally – we all do – and sometimes Hugo's column would appear and remind me of it just when I needed it the most.

I'm sorry to say I didn't have a whole lot in the way of personal interaction with Hugo. As I wrote, by the time I started Hugo's columns were exclusively an emailed affair, and I only had occasion to talk to him on the phone a handful of times per year, if that. But I always enjoyed when he'd call; he had a gentle voice that matched his spirit, matched his personality, to a tee. Much like his column, a call from him could brighten my day. I'm going to miss that gentle voice.

My heart goes out to Hugo's wife Marietta and his three daughters, Doreen, Anita and Nancy. I know this is an extremely difficult time for them – and I hope they can find some small comfort in knowing just how well-liked Hugo was.

Rest in peace, Hugo DeSarro. The *Rivereast* won't be the same without you.

* * *

Just a minor bit of housekeeping before I go: This is the last *Rivereast* of 2017. We don't publish an issue next week – and in fact the office will be closed all of next week. Don't call us; we won't be here.

Our next issue will be Jan. 5, 2018. That week, due to the New Year's holiday, we won't open until Tuesday, Jan. 2. However, our deadline will be unchanged. All copy – such as letters to the editor, news releases, event listings and pictures – **must** be submitted by **noon Tuesday, Jan. 2** for that week's publication. No exceptions can be made.

Merry Christmas and a happy new year from all of us at the *Rivereast*.

* * *

See you in 2018.

Obituaries

Colchester

Kyle Benjamin Zahacefski

It is with profound sorrow that the family of Kyle Benjamin Zahacefski announces his passing on Sunday, Dec. 10, at the age of 24.

Born Oct. 30, 1993, he leaves his loving parents, Johnny and Susanne (Labonosky) Zahacefski; two brothers, Taylor Zahacefski and Noah Garfield; paternal grandparents, Ronald and Nina Zahacefski; aunts and uncles, Ronald (and Liz) Zahacefski Jr.; Torey Zahacefski; Stephen Labonosky (and Joanne Halpern); cousins, Jamie, Jessica, Shane, Corey, Phoebe and Zander; and other extended family.

In the face of such a tragic loss, it is comforting to know that he has now found peace in the loving arms of those who had gone before him: his maternal grandparents, Benjamin and Marion Labonosky III, as well as his uncle and aunt, Benjamin and Ruthann Labonosky IV.

The family received guests Sunday, Dec. 17, at the Aurora-McCarthy Funeral Home, 167 Old Hartford Rd., Colchester. Services and burial were private.

In lieu of flowers, a memorial donation may be made in Kyle's name to the North Suffolk Mental Health Association, 301 Broadway, Chelsea, MA 02150 (or online at northsuffolk.org) to help others with struggles similar to his.

For online condolences, visit auroramccarthyfuneralhome.com.



Hebron

James M. McDonnell

James M. McDonnell, 91, of Hebron, passed away peacefully, with family members at his side, Friday, Dec. 15. Jim was born July 18, 1926, in the Bronx, N.Y., and was raised by his parents, the late James P. and Anne (O'Connor) McDonnell, in Williston Park, N.Y.

After graduating Xavier High School in New York City, he spent two years in Italy serving as a rifleman in the 88th Division of the United States Army. Upon his return he graduated from St. John's University and began a long, distinguished career working as a systems analyst at TIAA. He raised his family in Babylon, N.Y., before moving to Connecticut.

James leaves behind his loving wife of 56 years Mary; his daughter Maryanne and her husband Tom of Bolton; his son Michael and his wife Anne-Marie of Bolton; and his grandchildren Alyssa, Christina and Ethan.

James was predeceased by his daughter, Eileen.

A celebration of Jim's life will be held at the convenience of his family.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made in Jim's memory to Hungerthon 2017, 505 Eighth Avenue Suite 2100 New York, NY 10018 or at whyhunger.org.

Ladd-Turkington & Carmon Funeral Home has care of the arrangements.



Colchester

Joseph Savitski Jr.

Joseph "Babe" Savitski Jr. passed away peacefully Tuesday, Dec. 19, after a brief illness. A lifelong resident of North Westchester, he was born July 17, 1925, on the family farm, and was the last surviving child of the late Joseph and Cassmira (Modrzejewski) Savitski.

Mr. Savitski had worked for Baldwin Construction for many years before his retirement in the early 1990's. His heart was always at home on the farm, where he truly loved being "one with the land" and close to his family. Babe will also be remembered for his exceptional talent as a dancer, especially the polka.

He leaves his loving wife of nearly 50 years, Barbara (Higbie) Savitski; their daughter, Sheryl Verrill of Colchester; three stepchildren, Roger Kennedy of Colchester, Kevin Kennedy of Middletown and Robin Fontana (and her husband, Sal) of Colchester; eight grandchildren; two great-grandchildren; and numerous extended family and friends.

In addition to his parents, he was predeceased by his son, Todd; and eight siblings, Stanley, Ludwig, Theodore, Anthony, August, Julius, Anna and Regina.

The family will receive guests from 10-11 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 23, at the Aurora-McCarthy Funeral Home, 167 Old Hartford Rd., Colchester. Services and burial will be private.

In lieu of flowers, donations in his memory may be made to Middlesex Hospital Hospice & Palliative Care, 28 Crescent St., Middletown, CT 06457 (middlesexhospital.org/donate-now) or to the Alzheimer's Association, P.O. Box 96011, Washington, DC 20090-6011 (alz.org).

For online condolences, visit auroramccarthyfuneralhome.com.



Amston

Kathleen E. Sanders

Kathleen "Kat" E. Sanders, 54, of Amston, passed away Tuesday, Dec. 12, surrounded by her family at home. Kathleen was born July 19, 1963, in Hartford. She was the daughter of the late Robert H. and Dorothy (Morrison) Sanders.

She leaves behind her beloved daughters, Brianna Trainor and Giselle Pruneau, both of Amston; a brother, Michael Sanders and his wife Susan of Glastonbury; a sister, Sharon Poulin of Glastonbury; a nephew, Kyle Poulin; and two nieces, Tori Poulin and Molly Sanders, all of Glastonbury; her aunt, Mary Lou Danahy; cousins; many special friends; and her beloved dogs, Piper and Cisco.

Kathleen grew up in Glastonbury and lived there most of her life before moving to Amston. She worked as a claims adjuster for Zurich North America. She belonged to St. James Episcopal Church in Glastonbury. She had a special talent for cooking, baking and grilling.

Kat was her happiest outdoors on a sunny day, hiking, gardening, camping and swimming in Amston Lake. She enjoyed vacationing in Maine with her family, going to the beach and taking road trips with her daughters. She was passionate about the music she loved and enjoyed many, many concerts. She had a soft spot for all animals and rescued every pet she ever had. She was a generous person and offered her love and home up to anyone that was in need of a friend.

A funeral service was held Monday, Dec. 18, at the Mulryan Funeral Home, 725 Hebron Ave., Glastonbury. The Rev. Denise Cabana officiated. Burial was in East Cemetery, Manchester. Calling hours were Sunday, Dec. 17, at the funeral home.

For online condolences, visit mulryanfh.com.



East Hampton

SandraLee Kowal

On Saturday, Nov. 25, SandraLee (Buden) Kowal, 79, passed away at Hartford Hospital. Born in New Britain Oct. 1, 1938, she was the daughter of the late Alexander and Jeanette (McCusker) Buden.

She was raised in Newington and was a graduate of Newington High School. She attended local business schools for accounting and was a bookkeeper for many years. Sandra was a loving and caring person with strong family values. Additionally, she worked as a caregiver the last 25 years in the Newington and East Hampton areas.

Left to honor and cherish her memory are her three brothers, Brian Buden and his wife Frances, Dean Buden and his wife Juanita, Danny Buden and his wife Janet, as well as several cousins, nieces and nephews.

She was predeceased by her husband Fred Kowal and her son Kevin Kowal.

Her life was celebrated Tuesday, Dec. 5, with a Liturgy of Christian Burial at Church of the Holy Spirit, 182 Church St., Newington. There are no calling hours and burial will be private.

In lieu of flowers, contributions in her memory may be directed to the favorite charity of your choice. Newington Memorial Funeral Home, 20 Bonair Ave., Newington, is assisting the family.

