

# NEWSLETTER

VOL. 3

## Final Meeting of Selectmen Before Election Day

Stafford's Board of Selectmen made quick work of their agenda on Wednesday, November 1 — the last meeting of the current board before the election.

Amber Wakley-Whaley, Director of Grants and Community Development, stopped in to inform the Selectmen of her intent to apply for an EPA Brownfield Town Wide Assessment Grant for fiscal year 2024. Stafford can apply for up to \$500,000 “to assess sites contaminated by hazardous substances, pollutants, contaminants (including hazardous substances co-mingled with petroleum), and/or petroleum.”

Similar grant awards have, in the past, been used to assess The Witt School and Hydeville Mill. Hydeville Mill, which has been recommended for emergency demolition, could benefit from another round of grant money as the final assessments of the site can't be completed until after it's demolished. The money, however, would also help identify and assess new sites in town that could benefit from clean-up and redevelopment, like old mills and other industrial sites. Another site that might benefit from the grant is the Avery Park Apartments, senior housing run by the Stafford Housing Authority. Currently, many of the apartments are vacant due to perceived contamination. The grant could help assess and remediate any problems, getting those low-income units for seniors back in action. No vote was needed from the board.

Up next was the question of digital signage. Now that the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) has changed the regulations to allow for municipal use of digital signs (placement for the three signs procured with ARPA funds is on the PZC's next agenda), First Selectman Sal Titus drew up a policy to govern the signs.

Essentially, the policy limits the use of the signs to emergencies to prevent people from learning to tune them out. There will also be an application that allows citizens to apply to host a message. Applications are to be reviewed and approved by the First Selectman. Given the desire to limit the signs to emergency messaging, Selectman Kurt Vail asked why the application was even necessary. “What urgent message could a citizen have?” he wondered. Titus said messages about soldiers returning from deployment might be one appropriate non-emergency use of the signs. Fire prevention education could be another.

Ultimately, the board voted unanimously to approve the policy as written but set a six-month review date to revisit the process.

The board then took up the matter of waiving the bidding requirement for procuring ARPA-funded shelter boxes. At the October 5, 2023, ARPA meeting, Officer Jim Desso asked the commission to allocate funds to purchase three preparedness carts and 70 ProPac linen sets for \$6,655.00.

or \$7,978.02 including shipping). These supplies are to be used in an emergency shelter situation. In past meetings, Desso has explained that he usually buys a few a year in an effort to stock the emergency shelter at Stafford Middle School fully.

## Final Meeting Cont...

The commission asked what it would take to bring the shelter's supplies up to the required number of 250 kits. Desso said he would need eight preparedness carts and 140 ProPac linen sets to bring the shelter up to the required 250 kits. The ARPA commission unanimously approved up to \$15,000 (including shipping) for the preparedness carts and ProPac linen sets. However, because there is only one supplier for these supplies, Desso can not bid out the project, as is normally required. So, at the BOS, the board unanimously voted to waive the bidding requirement.

Other than some board appointments — or reappointments — the last item on the agenda was transferring \$7,720 dollars from the town's IT budget to the Housing Authority to pay for a new phone system. An unexpected rate hike forced the Housing Authority to implement a new phone system, which comes with a large upfront cost. The money was not allocated appropriately in the budget earlier in the year, so it had to be moved to cover the expense. Again, the board voted unanimously to reallocate the funds.



## PZC Takes on Signs and Lake Districts

At the latest meeting of the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC), old business finally got its day, and new business was on the commissioners' minds. For months, the question of where the digital signs bought with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds would wind up has lingered. If you remember our previous coverage, the signs were prohibited, so the PZC had to rewrite its regulations to allow them to be used by special permit.

There was then the final formal application and public hearing, which happened at the November 2, 2023, meeting.

As anticipated, the request was for the signs to be placed at the Department of Public Works, the Senior Center, and the West Stafford Fire Department. There are two signs measuring 5 feet by 6 feet and one measuring 5 feet by 8 feet. The larger sign is slated to go to the West Stafford Fire Department. All are dimmable and required by statute to be dimmed at night. There was one letter supporting the project submitted before the meeting, but no one showed up to speak for or against the project. The board voted to approve the placement of the signs, finally bringing the saga of the signs to a close.

Next on the agenda was a state-mandated text amendment to current regulations. Some towns do not permit in-home daycare centers, and to address that, the state now requires that towns treat in-home daycares and group daycares the same as residential buildings. The PZC had to vote to tweak the regulations to meet the state mandate formally. The motion passed. Once that was done, the commission turned its attention toward the future.

## PZC Cont...


PZC Chair Dave Palmberg said that during the commission's discussion about the town Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD), one of the topics that came up was the possibility of a lake zone overlay for the planning and zoning regulations. The main goal of the overlay district would be to reduce the number of requests for variances and appeals. Standardizing the regulations would also help make it fairer and more predictable for people in the area.

Additionally, new regulations could encourage low-impact development, erosion control, and create fertilizer requirements. In an effort to get input from the people who actually live on the lakes in town, the commission said it reached out to the organizations representing those lakes, including State Line Pond.

Aaron Hoffman, President of the Staffordville Lake Association, was the only one in attendance. The narrow lots on Staffordville Lake are often a source of zoning problems, as property owners seek to add on or otherwise modify their homes and encroach on their neighbors' property. In order to reduce the number of appeals, and more specifically, the number of appeals that can end up in court, the commission hopes to standardize things like setbacks from the road and side of the properties. Any variances in setback from the water have to go through the Inland Wetlands Commission, so they are handled separately.


"Most variances should not be approved," said Commissioner Richard Shuck. Variances are meant to help property owners address hardships created by a site. Quite often, however, variance requests are more about personal preferences or desires.

Palmberg suggested that PZC could make the regulations as strict as the Staffordville Lake Association wanted but that residents were the ones who would have to live with them, so their input was needed. Alternatively, he said the PZC could move on to one of the other many items they identified during the POCD process. The issue was left to Hoffman to take back to the association to discuss.



### The Roundabout Newsletter

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We're almost three weeks into this new endeavor, and we're so excited to tell you that the people of Stafford are embracing us with open arms! We're still building this thing out... and imagining new ways to bring in revenue that supports our mission. With that in mind, we designed a t-shirt! Buy 10 of them for your family to wear at Christmas, or just get one to buy while you participate in a moonlight paddle. Whatever you do, be sure to share them with your friends on social media so everyone can help support local news with a fun t-shirt. (Also, we're hoping to launch a newsletter section devoted to local deals... so tell your friends to subscribe so they get the newsletter and all the deals.)

[BUY ONE](#)

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#### Affordable Housing Explained

Six affordable housing units are coming to the former Borough School (more on that later), but we've seen a lot of confusion about what "affordable housing" really means. That's especially true in the local Facebook forums where misinformation abounds. So, we decided to take some time to explain what affordable housing is and is not. Next time you run into someone who seems confused, share this article with them.

[READ ON](#)

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#### The Roundup – Stories You May Have Missed

- [Borough School Project Gets the Go-Ahead](#)
- [BOE Looks at Budget](#)
- [Free Lunch Forms Are About More Than Meals](#)
- [Costs of Leaf Pickup Could Shift](#)
- [Hydeville Mill Moves a Step Closer to Demolition](#)
- [Rains Can't Quench Farm Day's Spirit](#)
- [Stafford Man Sentenced to 8 Months in Prison](#)

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## Taking a Closer Look at Stafford's Election Results

During a drive around town last week, I tried to make some educated guesses about how the election would pan out based on the yard signs. It's impossible to keep an accurate mental count, but when I pulled back into my own driveway, it seemed like the Democrats had the advantage. Of course, I live close to town, and those East Main Street Victorians lean left, so I couldn't tell if my mental tally was skewed.

Then I headed out to run some errands on election day. On my way toward West Stafford, I saw Bill Morrison and James Greene waving to passers-by from the Sara Mart parking lot. On my way back across town to pick up my CSA share at Mon Soleil, I had to dodge slow-moving voters pulling into the community center as a big group of Republicans waved from across the road.

At some point, I became convinced at least one yard had switched affiliations, as it had a big Republican yard sign where I could have sworn there was once a big sign for the Democrats. The big sign, however, was now accompanied by a smaller Morrison/Hartenstein sign. Very confusing indeed, but I love to see it. We need more people who aren't just cheering on their favorite team like this is Red Sox vs. Yankees and more people who support candidates based on the individual and his or her ideas and experience.

In the end, my sign-based hunch turned out to be right, at least for the Board of Selectmen (BOS) races. Bill Morrison won the first selectman's race and Rick Hartenstein was re-elected as selectman. Kurt Vail will serve as the third selectman on the board in addition to his duties as State Representative.

It's hard to imagine someone running a more enthusiastic and involved campaign for local office, and it worked. Morrison won by 119 votes, meanwhile, Hartenstein scored more votes than any of the BOS candidates (including Morrison) with 1,859 votes.

Lawn signs aside, I've been to a lot of meetings over the past few months, and Morrison is perhaps the only person who has been to more of them. I'm on the Economic Development Commission, and for at least three months (if not four, I've lost count) we have been unable to muster a quorum, and Morrison knows this because he showed up to one of our non-meetings just as the rest of us were ready to head out. When the BOS would go out to executive session, and just about everyone else would leave as well, I'd end up chatting with Morrison in the room until he got called away to an emergency. He's spoken about knocking on doors and has been nearly omnipresent at town events, even Arts on Main. He even sat down for a Facebook Live Q&A event in one of our local Facebook groups.

One of the first major issues likely to face this new board is a need for upgrades to the water treatment facility, which is a limiting factor for commercial development in town. Hartenstein is the Superintendent of the Water Pollution Control Facility, and therefore has an inside track on the needed upgrades. Keep an eye out for town-wide discussions likely to happen in early 2024.

### Board of Education results

Over at the Board of Education (BOE), things went a different way. Republicans Eileen Bartlett and Shana Boland were newly elected to the BOE and Mike Delano was re-elected. Democrat Jennifer Biedrzycki was also elected, however, James Greene lost his bid for the board.

In the run-up to the election, school budgets were on all the Stafford candidates' minds, but Boland and Bartlett also had different concerns. In [a candidate profile with the Stafford-Willington Patch](#), Boland wrote, "Lack of strategy that the district has to improve the academic achievement of its students. The district needs to shift its focus away from politically charged agendas and focus its energy on making sure our students have the appropriate reading, writing and math skills for their grade level."

## Election Results Cont...

As we reported after the most recent BOE meeting, [Stafford's scores are already on the rise](#). In the case of one assessment, all of Stafford's scores were above the state average when looking at all students and also when looking at just the high-needs population. At the previous meeting, Superintendent Steven A. Moccio [presented the comprehensive School Improvement Plan](#). (Those BOE meetings are very data-dense, so be sure to dive into the articles and explore how Stafford's students are doing and the plans already in place to continue improving outcomes for students.)

[Eileen Bartlett's profile with The Patch](#) gives readers an idea of what those "politically charged agendas" Bolan mentioned might be. She wrote, "Beyond budget, I feel very strongly about monitoring age appropriate content for our students. I also feel our equity and inclusivity policy should be audited and reviewed on a regular basis."

If you regularly attend (in-person or virtually) BOE meetings, you know that "equity and inclusion" often come up, usually because of one or two public commenters who take issue with everything from policies to specific books. This led current BOE member, Aaron Hoffman, to suggest changing language to stop using the words equity and inclusivity, changing them to something like, "Educational policies and practices that forge an environment that promotes a sense of belonging for all members of the community."

In her [Q&A with Stafford Free Press](#) (and during comment sessions at BOE meetings), Biedrzycki also addressed this recurring issue: "As a parent of a child who is in the special education program, I want to help people understand what equity and inclusion truly mean. Equity is receiving resources and support so all our children can be successful. It can include accommodations such as movement breaks, using audiobooks, modifying assignments, or having more time to complete a test. Inclusion is more than feeling valued and respected. To me, it means ensuring our children feel welcome and proud to be part of something bigger than themselves - part of their community, classroom, grade, club, sports team, or whatever it may be."

"Equity" is a very precise term used in educational circles to ensure students with different backgrounds or special needs get what they need to succeed. The importance of equity can be especially evident in a town like Stafford, where so many students are economically disadvantaged. West Stafford and Stafford Elementary, are Community Eligible Provision (CEP) schools, where all students receive free breakfast and lunch due to the high level of need in the community. To qualify as a CEP school, 40% of students must qualify for free/reduced lunch in the previous school year. Much of the Borough is also part of an environmental justice community, [defined by the Connecticut General Statutes as:](#)

- a distressed municipality, as designated by the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development; OR
- defined census block groups where 30% of the population is living below 200% of the federal poverty level.

For many students, receiving equitable resources (not just equal resources) can be the difference between success and failure. In addition to things like free lunch, students may get transportation fee waivers for sports or field trips, and other accommodations based on individual needs, such as those Biedrzycki mentioned.

Only time will tell how the changes in the BOE line-up, and possibly in priorities, will impact the education students receive and their outcomes.

### Wrapping up the Stafford election results

Karen Troiano, Stafford's long-time Town Clerk, also won re-election with more than 1,900 votes. Candidates Tony Pellegrino, Harold Blake Hatch, and Anthony Armelin were elected to the Board of Finance (BOF).

This BOF will tackle the big task of putting together next year's budget in conjunction with BOS and BOE. As we are all too aware, the town required three referendums to approve a budget in 2023. The process, however, starts months before at BOF meetings where concerned citizens have the opportunity to speak up about their priorities for the town. [Check out the rest of the election's results here.](#)

## ARPA Updates: Roads, Freezers, and More

With the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds saved from becoming a part of the general fund, the commission is back to deciding how to spend what's left.

At the November 2, 2023, meeting, Katherine Schooley from the Stafford Conservation Commission (SCC) asked the ARPA commission to fund the purchase of a storage shed at Dennis Pond. The SCC needs a place to store tools, lumber for footbridges, a kayak, and other equipment. The SCC requested a 10'x12' shed, which it said would cost \$4,233.10 plus \$600.00 for the platform pad. However, they noted this size was actually a bit small and that 12'x16' shed would be a better fit. A shed of that size would cost about \$7,200, plus the \$600.00 for the platform pad.

All ARPA-funded projects must be attached to uses specifically outlined by the federal government. In this case, eligibility is based on expanding the outdoor recreation opportunities for the community. The commission approved up to \$8,000 to purchase a shed and platform pad. With more than \$800,000 left in the ARPA bank account, there's still plenty of money to fund projects around town. As of November, there are a few options on the table.

**A freezer for Safenet:** SafeNet Ministries provides roughly 300 meals a month total families in need, but has recently had to turn away food donations because of a lack of storage options. A commercial freezer could cost \$10,000-\$13,000. No action was taken, but the project was added to the proposed project list.

**Road improvements:** Nothing gets people riled up more than a discussion about the condition of their local roads. For that reason, paving projects and road improvements come up frequently at ARPA meetings. However, the needs in town far exceed what's left of the ARPA funds. The commission discussed allocating up to about \$500,000 to road improvement and milling/paving. The commission also discussed software that can help prioritize paving projects to help get the most bang for the town's paving bucks. According to the commission, paving is a major priority for many town residents, and it can mitigate safety concerns during ambulance transport.

However, an allocation of this size would nearly wipe out the remaining ARPA funds. The commission voted 5-0, with Dave Bachiochi abstaining, to support paving improvement projects and update the Paving Condition software tool. Devin Cowperthwaite, Director of Public Works (DPW), will provide a progress report at the next meeting to clarify the scope of the work DPW could complete with an allocation of this size.

**Recreation Director:** Another recurring topic at the ARPA meetings is the idea of using the funds to hire a Recreation Director. Bachiochi expressed his interest in pursuing this and that he plans to bring up the topic at the November 21 meeting of the Board of Selectmen. At the October 5, 2023, meeting, Bachiochi also discussed possibly developing a recreation strategy. He said a third-party consultant could be engaged to develop a strategy that might include a future state for fields, lighting, skateboard park, ice skating, portable skating for Hyde Park, disc golf, PickleBall, or other items that may jumpstart a Recreation Department.

**Dog Park and Hyde Park Improvements:** ARPA Commission Chair Rick Hartenstein advocated for a dog park at the Hyde Park tennis courts at the October meeting. Bachiochi suggested enhancing the maintenance road access along the fence, adding a remote-controlled gate at the east and west end for police security access and emergency vehicles, and introducing security surveillance cameras to enhance safety enforcement and safety perception.

**Woodland Springs:** The ARPA committee already funded some work at Woodland Springs, an affordable housing project for the elderly and disabled, but back in September, the folks from Woodland Springs were back, asking for funding for the next phase of the project to help create outdoor areas for residents to use and enjoy. The proposal asked for over \$50,000 to build pavilions, pave for patios, and buy patio furniture, grill equipment, and more. Hartenstein suggested that if the commission were to provide any funding, it would have to focus on the permanent infrastructure and not furniture or grills. The request has been tabled pending a new proposal.

## Dude, Where Are Stafford's Students?

Student enrollment fluctuates in Stafford almost weekly, according to Superintendent Steven A. Moccio at the November 13, 2023, Board of Education (BOE) meeting. As of September 29, 2023, the district had 1,330 students, a decrease of 78 students from last year. By November 1, 2023, the student count was at 1,326.

The biggest change in enrollment happens between eighth and ninth grade as students choose to attend other schools. For instance, of this year's ninth graders:

- Seven students attend the Academy for Agriculture, Science, and Technology Education in Rockville
- Two students at the E.O. Smith's Agricultural Education program
- Eight students are at Cheney Technical High School
- Six students went to East Catholic High School
- One each went to Ellis and Prince Technical High Schools
- Six chose Windham Technical High School

All public schools must provide these magnet and specialized schools with access to students for recruitment purposes. However, the Stafford school district is still responsible for students who choose to attend some other schools. While the school system pays "tuition" for students to attend the other public schools, they are also, in some cases, required to provide transportation. For instance, the district is responsible for transporting students to Rockville but not E.O. Smith.

Meanwhile, Moccio says the district has 48 students that it is aware of participating in homeschooling. That is four fewer than last year, but [homeschooling laws are pretty lax](#), and parents are only requested to notify the schools of their intent to homeschool. There is no requirement that they do so.

Despite the declining enrollment, class sizes in some of the lower grades have increased due to budget cuts, which means there are fewer teachers. For instance, fourth-grade classes have 22 students per classroom as there are only four teachers.

Outgoing BOE Chair Laura Lybarger said Stafford will likely have difficulty keeping students in the district if it cannot pay teachers competitively. Moccio confirmed this, saying he had participated in exit interviews recently where it was clear the staff's decision to leave "really came down to dollars."

BOE member-elect — who has not yet started her term on the board — Jennifer Biedrzycki was watching at home due to illness in the family but took the opportunity to chime in during the public comment section. She expressed her frustration over staff regularly leaving the district, including a social worker who recently left the high school for another school district. She suggested that the district do a market analysis to show how Stafford's salaries compare to those in other districts so people can see what the district is competing with.

## BOE Republicans Object to Book Purchases

The November 13, 2023, Board of Education (BOE) meeting was the last for three members — Laura Lybarger, Sonya Shegogue, and Jennifer Davis — who chose not to seek re-election, which kicked off with controversy. During what is usually one of the more sedate and incomprehensible parts of a BOE meeting, the Consent Agenda, book purchases raised concerns for Republican board members. ([Watch the video here.](#))

The Consent Agenda vote is usually perfunctory, where the board votes on things that it's not clear they have any real power over — such as staff resignations — and the Bills and Grants. This month's Bills and Grants section included a line item for bundles of books purchased by the Stafford High School library. During the discussion of this portion of the agenda, Erica Bushior asked why the titles of books purchased by the library had not been listed individually and were instead listed as a bundle.

When Superintendent Steven A. Moccio said he would find and provide a list of the titles included in the bundles, Bushior said, "I've already Googled them, and there is absolutely no way I will approve this information knowing what I've read about these books."

She added, "Knowing our Stafford Community, they are going to be outraged when they see these books coming into our school system."

She went on to say some of the books in the [Mystery High Plus](#) bundle from the Junior Library Guild contained sexual content, rape, violence, and racial insensitivity, among other things. The Junior Library Guild describes the bundle like this: "For Grades 9 & Up Keep your high school readers turning pages with the riveting mysteries and spellbinding adventures in this 14-book category."

Outgoing Chair Lybarger asked if the district is following policies when buying these books, and Moccio confirmed that they were. Aaron Hoffman then reiterated Bushior's question about why the books were not listed by title, and Moccio said he had no answer for that question other than how the books were invoiced.

Hoffman then asked that someone explain to him "the need for books with this kind of content in it."

Davis said it would be interesting to have more context, asking, "Is violence someone gets slapped in the face or run over by a car?" Essentially, she made the point that it's impossible to know what any of these content warnings are referring to out of context.

Lybarger followed up, saying, "At the high school level, there is going to be that kind of content. There is some fantastic literature that includes that content and should not be removed from our schools. As a parent, we have the right to limit what our children read, but we don't have the right to limit what other children read."

To Lybarger's point, classic literature that is regularly taught in schools would now come with exactly these kinds of warning labels. For example, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (published in 1960) centers around the trial of a Black man in Alabama for a sexual assault that he did not commit. Themes of racism, poverty, violence, and sexual violence are all explored in this book. To be clear, however, the books in question by the BOE are not being taught in class; they are simply being made available in the library.

As the meeting proceeded and it became clear that Bushior, Hoffman, Delano, and Secretary Sara Introvigne Kelley, a Democrat, were not going to vote in favor of the larger overarching Consent Agenda due to their objections over these books, the board had to figure out exactly what that would mean, logistically.

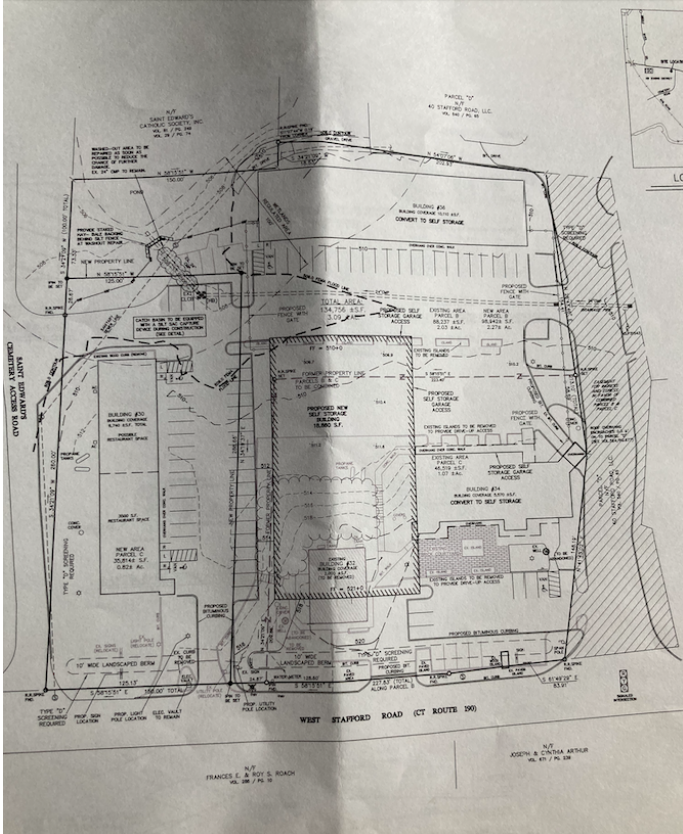
The books in question have already been purchased and paid for, and not approving this agenda item means the district may have to return the items. That would require following up with the library to see if they have already processed the books, which includes stamping them and adding pockets holding checkout receipts. If those things have already been done, they are no longer returnable. Bushior, Hoffman, Delano, and Kelley still voted against the motion to approve the Bills and Grants (which includes more than just these books), which means the



## Book Purchases Cont...

conversation will likely carry over to [the next BOE meeting](#) on December 11, 2023.

Moccio urged anyone in the audience who may be wondering about the procedures for material selection and how to lodge a complaint to review the district's policies. According to policy 6163, materials for school library media centers are to be made by "selected certified staff in consultation with administration, faculty, and sometimes students and parents." Policy 6161 addresses the procedure for lodging complaints, which you can see in the screenshots below or explore further [here](#). The key takeaway is there is a process in place for challenging potentially controversial materials, and it does not involve voting against already purchased materials.



Site plan for Country Village Shoppes.

## PZC Reviews Plans for Country Village Shoppes

The Country Village Shoppes are a frequent topic of conversation around town. They are rundown, mostly empty, and, according to Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) Chair Dave Palmberg's calculations, roughly \$26,000 in debt to the town of Stafford over blight fees. However, two out of those three problems could soon be a thing of the past.

Kenneth Hrica, an engineer and licensed surveyor representing Dunbeath LLC, was at the November 13, 2023, PZC meeting to present the site plan application for a total overhaul of the property at 30 West Stafford Road. After presenting the plans to the [Inland Wetland Commission](#) in September, the proposal has now moved onto the PZC.

Hrica told the commission that his client has not had luck renting out the property — though anyone familiar with the condition of the buildings and parking lots will know that most of them are in no condition to be rented.

In any case, Dunbeath LLC wants to turn most of the existing site into self-storage. Buildings 36 (at the back of the property) and 34 (where Hang's Asian Bistro currently is) would be converted. However, building 32 (the house-like building toward the front of the property) would be demolished, and a new 18,000+ square foot, three-story storage building would be built in its place. The proposal also includes outdoor RV and boat storage. Building 30, where Kolossos Restaurant used to be, would be renovated but remain a restaurant space.

The number of entrances to the property would be closed up and consolidated, and according to Hrica more than 4,500 square feet of new pervious surface would be added back to the site, eliminating a good deal of hardscape. The site has many drainage problems, some of which were addressed at the Inland Wetlands Commission, but a more landscaped, pervious surface generally means less runoff.

## Village Shoppes Cont...

Additionally, Dunbeath is looking to conduct a lot line revision to turn the old Kolossos building into its own lot, meaning the current owner could sell it while continuing to own and operate the new self-storage facility. There would be shared parking between the building, requiring an easement.

Once the other commissioners had a chance to ask their questions, Palmberg was ready with a list of questions and concerns that revealed the plan was not quite ready for primetime. Though the \$26,000 in blight fines have no bearing on the application before the PZC, Palmberg wanted the issue on the record. Later, he also said that before the meeting, he was informed the property owner was not current on his property taxes and regularly paid about six months late. No building permits can be issued until the taxes are up to date.

The issues Palmberg raised with the current proposal are too numerous to mention list fully here, but range from encroachment on property lines and places where the buildings do not meet setback requirements to sodium vapor lamps from the 1970s that will need to be removed. Current regulations require that after every ten parking spaces, an island is required, and that the state now requires that any parking area with more than 30 spaces put in the infrastructure for electric vehicle charging stations for 10% of the spaces (though they do not necessarily need to put the charging stations in at this time).

Palmberg asked that Hrica and Dunbeath check with the DOT about sight line issues that may be a problem from the easternmost driveway and any changes that may be needed to the traffic signals on Route 190. He also said that a sidewalk would need to be included in the plan as the commission has been requiring them in all new construction. He asked for four-foot sump pumps in the new catch basins to help with water quality issues and a hood to be placed on the last one to keep potentially hazardous materials out of the drainage pond at the back of the property.

Given the property owner's track record in town, Palmberg and members of the audience were concerned about the operations and maintenance plan. Palmberg asked that those plans be submitted to the commission and told concerned citizens that a failure to maintain the property would violate those plans. Enforcing any repercussions would be tough, though, as Commissioner Ron Houle pointed out, the property owner would have a much bigger financial incentive to maintain the property now.

Perhaps most problematic of all were the architectural plans. Palmberg said the plans do not currently come close to meeting the town's guidelines. For instance, the town's regulations say that no uninterrupted facades shall exceed 100 feet, that the appearance of a flat roof should be avoided, and that the PZC prefers to see a variation in materials. He pointed to Aubuchon's conversion of an old metal building as a good example, saying that they use false windows and barn doors to improve the appearance of the building.

In the end, given these concerns — and many others — the commission voted unanimously to table the issue until the December 21 meeting. This will give Hrica and the project architects time to address some of the commission's concerns.

## Controversial Policy Spurs Public Comments at BOE

As our article about the [October Board of Education \(BOE\) meeting reported](#), an existing policy about "Non-emergency Invasive Physical Examinations and Screenings" has raised concerns for some Stafford parents. Essentially, the policy says that the district would have to notify parents at the beginning of the school year of their intent to do an exam that fits into the non-emergency invasive physical examinations and screenings category. They would have to provide the dates and approximate times of the screenings, and parents could opt out of the procedure.

Superintendent Steven A. Moccio addressed the policy in a follow-up newsletter (detailed in [the October article](#)), but it has not entirely quelled parental concerns.

During the public comment section of the November meeting, two parents spoke to address these concerns.

Larisa Dunay said she was there to represent a group of parents who could not attend the meeting. She told the board they were concerned about this policy and asked that a discussion of this policy be added to the next BOE meeting as an agenda item and that suggested scenarios would help parents better understand why this policy is necessary. Dunay also pointed out that dental clinics are opt-in and that parents would prefer that this policy be changed to make it opt-in.

Alissa Criniti-Woods expressed many of the same concerns. Criniti-Woods also said that telling parents they misunderstand the policy was "parent-shaming." She said the problem is that the policy exists in the first place and that "It never occurred to me that this was an option." She also acknowledged that the federal government requires the policy but that her research suggests "the policies are the bare minimum requirement" and that the district can develop them further in consultation with parents. Criniti-Woods also advocated for an opt-in policy.

The board did not respond to indicate whether or not this policy would be added to the next agenda for discussion.

## Wide-ranging Discussions at Recent EDC Meeting

By the Forestville Free Press correspondents

Here is the summary of the Economic Development Commission (EDC) meeting of Wednesday, November 21, 2023, held at the Veteran's Meeting Room, Town Hall, Stafford Springs, CT, at 6:30 p.m.

EDC commissioners present were Tony Armelin, EDC chairman; Larry McKinney, Chris Paradiso, John Wittenzellner, Scott Nigro, Larry Vaughn, and Theresa Cramer.

The following topics were discussed among EDC commissioners and several Stafford residents attending the meeting, including newly elected First Selectman Bill Morrison:

### **New Business Proposed**

EDC member John Wittenzellner introduced town resident Eric Ross who is proposing to open an auto body business at 44 West Stafford Road, the site of the former Dick's Auto Body. Ross described his years of auto body experience, having previously operated his own business and having spent time working for other auto body shops. Always interested in promoting new businesses in town, EDC members expressed their support. So, what are the next steps to open a new business? Consulting with the town's Building and Zoning office was recommended. Newly elected First Selectman Bill Morrison, who was present at the meeting, suggested that the Town prepare an easy-to-use set of procedures for new business prospects. The commissioners generally agreed that this was a good idea.

### **Farm Day Success Becoming a Challenge**

Stafford Agricultural Commission Chairman David Mordasky summarized the evolution of Farm Day, which, over the past three years, has become a well-attended annual town event. Centered around the Town of Stafford's Heritage Park at the intersection of Stafford Street and Route 190, the

## EDC Meeting Cont...

Mordasky emphasized that Farm Day has developed into a larger event that needs professional accounting oversight by the Town of Stafford. He said that a fundamental goal of Farm Day remains to provide agricultural scholarships. The event needs to be organized under a supervised accounting system, remarked EDC member John Wittenzellner, who is the owner of the Witt Farm.

On behalf of the organizers of Farm Day, Wittenzellner and Mordasky discussed their concerns in order to start a brainstorming process that can help to develop ways of improving the multifaceted management tasks related to an event of this type.

### **American Woolen Company Update**

Jacob Harrison Long, owner of American Woolen at 8 Furnace Avenue in Stafford, reported that 78% of the woolen fabric manufactured at his mill is sent to China for garment construction. Long believes that American consumers are increasingly concerned about where their clothing is made, favoring domestic manufacturers in light of recent supply chain interruptions.

Long continues to build a consortium of investors and U.S.-based garment manufacturers, which he hopes will help develop New England's blue-collar workforce into a "guild-quality" resource akin to the workforce prevalent in the world-class Italian textile industry. Long envisions Stafford becoming a destination for textile tourists, entrepreneurs, and skilled craftspeople proud of their expertise in producing high-quality woolen material. He mentioned how Japanese clients know where New England is and are keenly aware of the region's charm. Stafford Springs is a "darn good story," quipped Long.

Long wanted to update the current members of the EDC about his ongoing efforts to promote Stafford as he continues to work with U.S. Representative Joe Courtney to gain support with State of Connecticut officials to capitalize on the social and physical assets of Stafford and other regional businesses in Rhode Island and New York City that are involved in the consumer nondurable goods industry.

Long added that woolen fabric made in Stafford at American Woolen will be used by designer Ralph Lauren to make apparel for the 2024 Winter Olympic Games.

### **"Biofinishing" for Eco-friendly Production of Leather Goods**

In regard to promoting a consumer nondurable goods industry in the area, Long said that he has encountered a company named Evolve by Nature, based in Needham, MA, which is creating "green chemistry" solutions for tanning leather without noxious chemicals.

The presence of the New England Meat Outlet at 30 Furnace Hollow Road in Stafford may offer an unusual yet practical business opportunity for someone. The outlet is a source of hides that can be "biofinished" for use in the production of leather goods.

### **Chestnut Hill Historic House: Is Preservation Possible?**

Stafford Historic Advisory Commission Vice Chairman Donald Passardi informed the EDC about concerns over the fate of the colonial-era home at 75 Chestnut Hill Road. Recent work on the surrounding land suggests that the current owner, Lots & More of South Windsor, may be preparing to sell or subdivide the acreage. Passardi is seeking consensus among various Town commissioners to sign a collective letter expressing concern about the fate of this colonial-era structure, which oral tradition suggests had been relocated to Stafford from another town in eastern Connecticut in the 1700s. It is hoped that options other than demolition of the historic home may be possible.

EDC member Wittenzellner said that he has reached out to the owner of Lots & More, who originally intended to grow flowers on the 28-acre property for two Lots & More stores and rent equipment from the Chestnut Hill location. Wittenzellner said that, in the past, the Town had denied the renting of equipment from that site. Before the next EDC meeting, Wittenzellner said that he will contact the owner to get an update.

## EDC Meeting Cont...

### Overview of EDC Agenda Items

#### Town Sewer Plant Expansion

Water Pollution Control Facility Superintendent Rick Hartenstein presented a brief overview of the expansion project under review for the water pollution treatment facility at 50 River Road. Hartenstein reported that the current plant processes 1 million gallons of sewage daily. If the volume of sewage increases to 1.2 gallons daily, the current design cannot handle that volume and the solids will float and not be adequately processed, a condition which must be reported to State of Connecticut agencies. The proposed \$17 million expansion would allow for treatment of 2 million gallons per day. The details of this proposal will be presented by Hartenstein and the WPCA at a public hearing that is projected to be scheduled for January 2024.

#### Town Marketing Package

Theresa Cramer has been working on videos for viewing on Facebook and Instagram to promote patronizing Stafford businesses on “Small Business Saturday” (November 25, 2023).

#### Stafford Brownfields Initiative Update

In the absence of Amber Wakley-Whaley, who usually gives the brownfields update, Theresa Cramer turned the discussion toward the possibility of using the Staffordville School, now vacant, as an incubator space for developing businesses, artists, or tradespeople. Larry McKinney commented on the cost of heating the building and that conducting private business in a town-owned building may present issues with regard to liability insurance and general policy regulations. Cramer replied that grants may be available to develop incubator spaces.

#### Tax Incentive Ordinance

Currently, no further details are available regarding a tax incentive ordinance. Further development of this ordinance will require review by the town’s attorney. First Selectman Bill Morrison asked Chairperson Armelin to send him background materials about the plan that had been discussed by the EDC members with then-First Selectman Sal Titus at a previous meeting of the EDC.

### Potential New Businesses and Ribbon Cutting Ceremonies

Work is proceeding by the new owner of 2 Middle River Drive to convert the former Bank of America building into a new site for Domino’s Pizza. Workmen are actively working there daily, preparing for an opening in approximately six months. John Wittenzellner commented that a ribbon cutting had not taken place when Kolossos Restaurant and Pizza relocated from 30 West Stafford Road to the former Muzio Plumbing building at 18 West Stafford Road, because the restaurant had to reapply for a license to serve alcoholic beverages. Once that license is obtained, the EDC will plan to do the ribbon-cutting ceremony. The owner of Country Village Shops at 30-38 West Stafford Road has applied to the Stafford Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) to do the following (1) to convert two buildings on site into storage facilities, (2) to demolish one building, and (3) to update the former site of Kolossos Restaurant and Pizza in order to rent it to another restaurant. This project is currently on hold awaiting PZC approval. No opening date has yet been determined.

John Wittenzellner commented that the garage building and its associated property purchased by the State of Connecticut during the construction of the Route 190/Route 19 roundabout in Stafford is available for sale.

### Possible budget uses

EDC member Theresa Cramer commented that the Stafford Arts Commission and the newly organized Events and Celebration Committee may experience shortfalls in their 2023-24 budget year, and she asked if the EDC would consider allocating funds from the EDC budget to assist them. Chairperson Armelin responded that any such request should be presented in person by Commission/Committee members at a meeting of the EDC.

The Forresterville Correspondents – Our family has lived in Forestville for over a century. You will likely ask: “Where is Forestville?” In the 1950s and 1960s, the Town published separate booklets of men and women voters by voting district. Judging from the voters’ family names, Forestville folks resided along the stretch of today’s Route 190 that runs from the intersection of Route 32/Route 190 to Route 319/Route 190. Despite increasing commercialization in this area since the 1960s, a few family homes remain, and we are committed to monitoring what is happening in “our neck of the woods.”

## All About the National Register of Historic Places Designations

By Becky Kraussmann and Jamie Furness, Stafford Historical Society

Maybe you have noticed the small brown signs that say Historic District on the roadside as you head into the Mill Pond area. Or the small oval plaque depicting a tree on Memorial Hall? Those signs let people know they are entering the Stafford Hollow Historic District, part of the National Register of Historic Places (NHRP). This is a list of the country's buildings, sites, structures, artifacts, and districts that are worthy of preservation because the building or area is historically significant – either because of the architecture or because it's associated with an important person or movement.

In 1987, the Stafford Historical Society felt the Stafford Hollow area of town fit the criteria to be included on the NHRP. They spearheaded an effort to document the sites significant in the village's history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture, which led to the successful nomination and designation of the Stafford Hollow Historic District to the NRHP.

In 1992, the town of Stafford received a Community Development Block Grant from the Connecticut Department of Housing to do a high-level survey of historic structures in the town. This was part of an ongoing federal effort to identify historic places nationwide. The hired consultant worked with the Stafford Historical Society on this project. This resulted in a multi-volume document that presented an overall history of the town and an evaluation of the historic structures that were still standing. Almost 600 structures in Stafford were identified as historically significant – each site was inventoried, given an approximate date of creation based on stylistic features and/or documentation, and photographed. Unfortunately, 45 of those 600 structures are no longer standing.

This survey also recommended that historic districts be established in the following areas: Stafford Street, Staffordville, Hydeville, West Stafford, Orcuttville, and the borough of Stafford Springs. Since the borough comprises distinctly different areas, the survey recommended the

following sub-districts: Main Street, Furnace Avenue, East Main Street, Foxville, Highland Terrace and Hyde Park, Olympic Circle, and Prospect Hill.

Because of this recommendation, in 2021, the Town of Stafford, in collaboration with the Stafford Historic Advisory Commission and the Stafford Historical Society, applied for and received a \$20,000 Survey & Planning Grant administered by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) of the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD). This grant allowed the procurement of a CFR-qualified (Code of Federal Regulations) historic architectural consultant, Roblee Historic Preservation, LLC, to complete a Historic Designation Report and the necessary documentation to nominate Stafford's Downtown to the National Register of Historic Places.

This project area includes portions of Main Street, Highland Terrace, Furnace Avenue, River Road, and Hyde Park. With the project underway, some questions/concerns have been raised regarding the nomination and the NRHP impacts. The proposed NRHP listing does not impose restrictions on private property owners. For example, buildings/structures within the Stafford Hollow District have been altered or torn down without restraints.

Instead, the benefits of being on the NRHP include:

- Registration is primarily an honor.
- Expands the Town's eligibility for public funding and grant support.
- Boosts the local economy through advertising, place-based marketing, and heritage tourism.
- Helps qualified historic properties/projects receive possible tax benefits and incentives.
- Encourages local historic preservation.
- Strengthens community pride, identity, and value of local history.
- Builds important documentation of historically significant buildings in the district and augments reporting completed by volunteers to date.
- The proposed project directly fulfills directives outlined in the Stafford Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD).

## National Register of Historic Places Designations Cont...

Will I have to get permission to repair or make alterations to my home? If I'm on the National Register, will I have officials look over my shoulder? No. These restrictions are related to a Local Historic District (LHD). This kind of district is created and governed locally through committees and ordinances where a homeowner must seek approval for changes done to their home.

Stafford DOES NOT have such a committee or commission (The Stafford Historic Advisory Commission is, as the name says, only advisory to the Board of Selectmen – it has no power nor budget). A historic Downtown and Hyde Park district would have no control over properties and is only an honorary designation.

So, where is Stafford in the process? The nomination process is underway. The project initially experienced pandemic-related delays and received State extension approvals to complete the project thoughtfully. Roblee Historic Preservation (CFR-Consultant) was hired in late 2022, a Community Information Meeting was held in February 2023, and Roblee has since researched and photographed the proposed area. They have also completed a draft of the official nomination form. Next up, the nomination will go through reviews by the Town and the State Historic Preservation Office, followed by an informational hearing for the public in 2024.

The final boundaries will not be decided until after being reviewed. Right now, it encompasses Main Street from the Town Hall to Church Street, Tolland Avenue and Hyde Park Road to the west, Highland Terrace to the south, and a small piece of River Road where it joins Haymarket Square. Once the area is finalized, letters will be sent to property owners within the boundaries, giving them information on the NRHP program, instructions, and the opportunity to accept or reject the NHRP designation. If a majority of owners return a letter of dissent to the State Historic Preservation Office, then the nomination is not submitted and is only kept on file for informational use and research. If the majority of property owners vote for it, the nomination proceeds to the federal level. If it is accepted, then Stafford will have its second historic district.

