

Council ends year with a new look, new focus

By Tom Shevlin

With three new members, the Jamestown Town Council has a different look than it did at the beginning of the year. However, it continues to work on familiar issues as 2008 approaches.

Early in the year, debate swirled around the town solicitor position. The debate was sparked in November 2006 by an oral request from then-solicitor Lauriston Parks to take over the town's legal work from fellow solicitor William Harsch. By February, Harsch, who had served as town solicitor since July 2003, submitted his resignation following a public falling out with councilors over a dispute about executive session meetings. After reviewing 11 bids, councilors awarded the position to current town solicitor Peter Ruggiero.

Also in February, lead paint contamination inside the Beavertail Lighthouse keeper's quarters and around the perimeter of the tower led to renewed controversy over control of the facility, its use for affordable housing, and the future of the light. By May, Beavertail Lighthouse Museum stakeholders were preparing their bid to take control of the light from the government, while Town Administrator Bruce Keiser recommended that the town forfeit its claim altogether. In the most recent development earlier this month, newly elected councilor Robert Sutton had renewed calls for the town to step in and assert its position as a rightful caretaker for the island landmark.

In April, councilors ratified a letter of opposition regarding ongoing work to site a liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility at Weaver's Cove in Fall River, Mass. The letter, sent to Coast Guard Capt. Roy Nash, stated, "The council believes that the proposed project poses unacceptable risks from the standpoint of navigational safety, environmental quality, and bay se-

curity."

After years of debate, councilors approved the site of a new highway barn on Taylor Point in May, with then-Council President David Long casting the deciding vote in a split 3 to 2 decision. Long, who had previously been a supporter of building the facility on Lot 47 on North Main Road, held the council chambers in suspense as he switched his vote. By September, a special election was held seeking voter approval for the \$1.5 million project, and town engineers were finally given the green light to commence work on the long-awaited barn.

Also in May, the council unanimously passed an emergency resolution outlining seasonal restrictions at the East Ferry pier, and also adopted a \$19.8 million budget for fiscal year 2008.

In June, council members toured the town-owned piers at East Ferry to examine needed repairs that had been identified by Harbor Commission members. Councilors continued their discussions over the East Ferry facilities through the end of the year, and the matter is expected to be revisited in 2008. The town also endorsed the creation of an island art district.

By July, councilors were focused on hammering out details with the Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority (RITBA) for the purchase of a piece of land needed to site the town's highway barn on Taylor Point. At the same time, town employees were gearing up in anticipation of the opening of the new Town Hall in the fall.

In August, debate surrounded three upcoming votes: the highway barn, the farmland buyback proposal, and the town's traditional municipal elections. On Aug. 28, voters went to the polls for the first of the three votes and approved a referendum allocating \$1.5 million for the construction of a highway

garage at Taylor Point, by a vote of 934 to 753.

In the most dramatic moment of the year, over 400 Jamestown residents turned out on Tuesday, Sept. 18, to weigh in on the town's plans to participate in a farmland buyback deal to preserve 145 acres of the island's open space. The vote was emphatic and unanimous.

Jamestown's Wind Energy Committee also received the support of the town in the form of \$25,000 allocation from the town council to conduct a feasibility study for the possible construction of a windmill on the island.

October marked the opening of the new Town Hall. The building, which was designed by island resident William Burgin's noted

Newport architectural firm Burgin and Lambert, came in within the town-approved \$3 million budget, and held its first council session to a packed house at an Oct. 29 meeting.

In November, Jamestown voters went to the polls again, this time to elect a new slate of town councilors. At the top of the ticket was former Town Administrator Robert Sutton, followed by two-term councilor Julio DiGiando, newcomer Michael White, and incumbents William Kelly and Barbara Szeptowski. Stepping aside was Town Council President David Long, while councilor Michael Schnack narrowly lost re-election.

Controversy over the election of the new council president, which has traditionally been awarded to the top

vote-getter, ensued after Sutton was passed over by a 3 to 2 vote in favor of former Town Council vice-president DiGiando. However, by their second meeting, councilors had re-focused themselves on prioritizing issues for the next year.

Coming off a year in which long-standing matters, like the siting for the town's new highway barn and the construction of a new town hall were settled, councilors will again deal with the completion of the town's highway barn, address improvements to the town's East Ferry piers, examine the disposition of the Beavertail Lighthouse, and more.

They will begin to address some of these matters when it meets for the first time in 2008 on Jan. 14.

School district gets arts grant and becomes eligible for federal aid

By Michaela Kennedy

The Jamestown school district has received a Rhode Island Council on the Arts (RICA) grant of \$1,700, aspiring principal Carole Melucci reported to the School Committee at its Dec. 20 meeting. The district is also eligible for Impact Aid from the federal government, according to Superintendent Marcia Lukon.

Grant money approved from the state arts council will be used in the third grade, Melucci said. Community members will be invited into the school to share stories of Jamestown, and students will subsequently write their own Jamestown stories. Local author Kelly Easton will assist the students with the project, and Island Moving Company will help the students put the stories to dance.

In the superintendent's report, Lukon reported that 11 percent of the students at the Jamestown schools came from military families, making the district eligible for Impact Aid, which is govern-

ment financial assistance to school budgets affected by federal activities. Lukon went on to show the committee standardized test scores of Jamestown students at North Kingstown High School and ongoing enrollment data. Committee members praised Lukon for providing them with student data. "This is a gigantic step forward to have access to this," School Committee chairwoman Cathy Kaiser said. Committee member Julia Held asked Lukon to continue checks on student performance in Spanish, math and keyboarding, calling the areas "a perennial concern."

Lukon gave the committee a memorandum from Rhode Island Department of Education Commissioner Peter McWalters announcing changes approved by the Board of Regents to special education regulations. Student Services Director Robert Fricklas explained the changes, including class size and case loads to be decided based on the needs of students in each district. "Knowing there will be a monetary squeeze, it will be interesting to see how each district handles their situation," Fricklas said.

In the principal's report, Kathy Almanzor announced that the Survey of Accountability in Learning and Teaching (SALT) was complete. The principal noted that fewer SALT surveys were returned from parents this year. Teachers and students also participated in the written survey, and results will be reported from the Rhode Island Department of Education to the district in the spring.

Almanzor was praised by the committee for the proper handling of an incident where a student brought a pocket knife to school. She noted that the message of no tolerance "is being heard, and we are proud of the kids who came forth with the information."

Newly-appointed committee member B.J. Whitehouse noted that the committee was 100 percent behind the five-day suspension of the student. "We tip our hats to her effort," he added. The committee also noted that a more specific policy on the possession of weapons should be drafted.

In a discussion about North Kingstown High School tuition, Kaiser reported on a meeting with NKHS business manager Ned Draper to discuss the increase in special education tuition. Draper explained that the lower cost of tuition from the previous year and the seemingly high increase this year was due mostly to the correction of an error in InSite school data reporting. The new tuition formula has been reviewed by the new business manager and seems to be fair, Kaiser added.

In a review of policy changes, the committee unanimously approved the amended policy on tutor reimbursements and the policy on the use of school buildings by non-school entities. The committee also read a new policy draft on in-school distribution of materials from outside the school. The review will continue at the Jan. 17 business meeting.

In other business, the committee: Accepted "with regret and gratitude" the resignation of Pamela Allen, instructor of Physical Education. Allen taught in the district for 29 years.

Discussed hiring a .7 P.E. teacher to complete the remainder of the school year. The committee agreed that in future years the position should be advertised as a .5 position with an additional .2, or an amount to be determined based upon current need, for adaptive P.E.



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TOWN COUNCIL FOLLY

"The Jamestown Town Council will... take action to abandon as a public highway the extension of Eldred Avenue between East Shore [Road] and Narragansett Bay... The Town right of way to the shore is bounded on both sides by land owned by Commerce Oil Refining Corp. When the road is abandoned... [ownership of the] strip will pass to [Commerce Oil]."
-Newport Daily News, December 10, 1957

What a loss to the Town! Prime public access to the Bay, with a substantial pier constructed by the Navy, was snatched from our Town's citizens forever by a short-sighted Council.

Several lessons emerge: a) the support of an apparent majority of the citizenry does not insure correct Council judgments; b) nor does the blessing of the Town Solicitor; and c) citizens must remain ever vigilant to guard against foolish acts (and worse) by their government.

Every citizen here should read (and read again periodically) *Dismissed With Prejudice*, by Mary Stearns McLaughan and Terrence F. McLaughan.

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