

Plunge

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warm bodies meet frigid waters.

After a minute or less of sheer torture and agony, the crowd disappears back into warm vehicles as quickly as it gathered. There, warm dry clothes and a hot coffee or chocolate await slightly blue people who always vow to "never do it again . . . till next year," when they will be at the beach for the very good cause.

McGovern said there were a few who have been coming for nearly 30 years since the first event in 1976. "The whole thing started as a lark, on a dare," McGovern said, reflecting on the Jamestown's Penguin Plunge Club's meager beginnings. "Actually, we're not a club. The Penguin Plunge has always

been an event. We should probably change our name," he said.

The Jamestown penguins rank among the ten oldest North American groups documented as winter swimmers, well behind the Coney Island Polar Bears who started in 1904, but far ahead of other Special Olympic Penguins who have participated in raising true cold cash.

McGovern, who was a special education teacher during the first decade of his penguin-like activities, now lives in North Kingstown and is executive director of Special Olympics Rhode Island. The only other original local penguin is John Kelly, who will join McGovern and the other penguins at the New Year's Day event.

The Special Olympics were founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver in 1968 through her family's 1946 foundation in memory of her

brother Joseph who was killed in World War II. The foundation was developed to improve the ways society relates to those with intellectual disabilities, like their sister Rosemary Kennedy. Special Olympics started with about 1,000 athletes from 26 states. It now reaches more than 2.5 million people with mental challenges in more than 165 countries.

McGovern encourages everyone attending or participating to stop at the police station where they can make donations, purchase T-shirts, pins and other memorabilia, as well as register to participate or to make pledges.

Anyone wanting details about the New Year's Day plunge, or to learn about the year round volunteer options can call Michael McGovern at 823-7411.

EZ-Pass

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couple bales of hay in the back of their truck, they will weigh more than I do, yet I still have to pay a higher toll than they do," he said.

RITBA Chairman David Darlington said he is not sure where the authority came up with the 8,000-pound limit, but it was written into the regulations in 2002.

"The 7,000 pound limit used by E-ZPass comes from a federal regulation that considers vehicles over 7,000 pounds as commercial vehicles. It is used in all 13 states where E-ZPass is installed," Darlington said. "There were one million nuances to installing a system like this, and maybe five of them got through. This was one of them."

By the time word had gotten out about the loophole, RITBA was already in the process of rectifying the situation. "This was definitely not something we had a very good handle on going in, but we have asked our contractor to write a program in the software to allow us to change our charge," Darlington said.

In the meantime, vehicles that fall into the gap are not paying an additional charge, according to Darlington, because those vehicles are still able to use tokens.

"If for some reason it is not fixed

by the time we stop accepting tokens, we are able to adjust an account for the difference in toll. That is the beauty of a system like this," the chairman said.

However, it is important, he said, that bridge users are aware of the reason higher tolls exist for heavier vehicles. "The more a vehicle weighs, the more wear it causes on the bridge. We had some people under the token system who were using tokens to pay for a 10,000 pound vehicle," he said.

Toll gates

Four drivers have run into the toll gates installed in the E-ZPass lanes since the system went live on Dec. 16. Darlington said two of the collisions were from toll evaders: one who was going about 60 miles per hour, one was a driver from Maine and one was a person who proceeded before the gate was completed raised. "They do not have toll gates on the E-ZPass lanes in Maine, so the driver was just not looking for gate," Darlington said. "All of the gates on the lanes today are the original gates that were installed with the system. They have breakaway pins and safety devices built in."

The gates are designed to read the transponder and be out of the way by the time a vehicle traveling 15 miles per hour gets to the gate.

"That is a very reasonable

speed," Darlington said. "No one should be going any faster in that area anyway because of safety considerations."

The contractors have been re-adjusting the antennas to pick up the transponder signal to respond under the 15 mile per hour conditions. "They have been out at our request adjusting the antennas to get the maximum response from them. We will continue to adjust them as necessary to get the exact timing we need from them," Darlington said.

Although some bridge users have given feedback about the gates, Darlington says the gates are permanent.

"They are there to ensure revenue to the authority. We have a lot of travelers from out of state and it is expensive and impractical for us to chase toll violators, especially those from out of state," he said.

Local lanes

All toll lanes will have E-ZPass operational by mid-January, Darlington said, including the far outside lanes designed for local traffic. "The system had to be installed from the inside lanes out, but all lanes will be fully operational by Jan. 23," he said.

Three of the lanes in each direction will be equipped to accept cash or E-ZPass.

For more information about E-ZPass, visit www.ritba.org.



Full-service family

The three sons, all students at military service academies, of newly-promoted Brigadier General Thomas Vandal, third from left, carry on the proud military tradition of their father. On hand to support their dad at his promotion ceremony were, left to right, Stephen, United States Naval Academy class of 2012; Nicholas, USNA class of 2009 and Eric, United States Military Academy at West Point class of 2011.

Vandal receives first star

Col. Thomas S. Vandal was promoted to the rank of brigadier general on Nov. 14 at Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield in Georgia.

Vandal is the step-son of islander Patricia Vandal and the son of the late Maurice Vandal.

He is a 1978 graduate of North Kingstown High School, a 1984 graduate of West Point and is serving as the deputy commanding general (support) of 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Stewart.

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