

# The Montague Reporter

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THE VOICE OF THE VILLAGES

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## UNEARTHING THE ARCHIVES

### Introducing... The Western Massachusetts History Collective



MONTAGUE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

This photograph of the Gem Market on Third Street in Turners Falls, dated to the 1970s, is one of thousands of items on view in the new online archive.

By CHARLOTTE KOHLMANN

**MONTAGUE** – Local historical societies, with limited budgets and a lack of experience with technology, often have trouble connecting with the people they hope to provide knowledge to.

“A lot of this stuff is buried, and in forgotten cubbyholes,” says Ed Gregory, a local historian and member of the Montague Historical Society.

The contents of these special-collection repositories are often sequestered in stacks in dusty, crowded rooms, leaving artifacts unseen and hindering the opportunity for more eyes to enjoy them. The way information is shared from these very small collections is not consistent with how the world communicates today; many cater to a specific kind of patron, requiring in-person visits by those who know what they intend to find.

“Most local historical societies of today don’t get it,” says Chris

Clawson, a member of both the Montague Historical Society and the Museum of Our Industrial Heritage in Greenfield. “Old information needs to be adapted... We need translators of these materials, which means bringing them into the digital world.”

Online archives are expensive to build, and their upkeep can break the bank. An independent consumer might spend upwards of \$50,000 annually on commercial database software. Many large-scale archival undertakings are made possible only by the deep pockets of private investors, or with the benefit of cultural grants or institutional endowments.

But Gregory and Clawson have found an alternative: a zero-cost, open-source loophole on which they built the foundation of their new online project, the Western Massachusetts History Collective. Clawson, a historian and technology buff, taught himself for free

see ARCHIVES page A6

## MONTAGUE SELECTBOARD

### Virtual Town Meeting Likely; Required for Airport Deal

By JEFF SINGLETON

The Montague selectboard held two meetings back to back on December 21. At the first, Turners Falls Airport manager Brian Camden presented a plan for the airport, which is publicly owned by the town of Montague, to purchase private property adjacent to the runway from a company called Pioneer Aviation. This was a joint meeting with the finance committee, capital improvements committee, and airport commission.

After nearly an hour, these committees closed the first meeting and the selectboard opened its regular meeting with the board of health.

The basics of the proposed purchase have been presented at previous selectboard meetings. Pioneer plans to sell its property, which currently houses a hangar, maintenance and storage facilities, a fueling station, and a flight school crucial to the town airport operation. Camden and members of the airport commission are concerned that if the property is sold to a non-aviation company, the airport will no longer be viable.

The Pioneer purchase is time-sensitive and must be approved, along with significant borrowing and an increase in this year’s airport budget, by a special town meeting this

see MONTAGUE page A10

## GILL SELECTBOARD

### Ward Will Not Seek A Fifth Term This Spring

By JERRI HIGGINS

On Monday evening Gill’s selectboard reviewed the draft update of the town’s open space and recreation plan (OSRP), approved a sewer rate increase for the Riverside neighborhood, discussed a backlog of town administration projects, and appointed a seasonal snow plow driver, among other agenda items. Four-term selectboard member John Ward mentioned that he did not plan to run for re-election next spring.

In 2017, when Gill’s last open space and recreation plan expired, the town collaborated with the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) to analyze its assets and needs.

Megan Rhodes, FRCOG’s senior planner, told the selectboard that the effort culminated in over 100 pages of information, findings, and recommendations for the town.

“The plan does an inventory of all the town’s open space, natural resources, and recreational assets in town that are currently existing,” Rhodes said, “and what you may need in the future – based on

see GILL page A4

## Feared Evictions Pushed Back As Rental Aid Trickles Down

By SARAH ROBERTSON

**GREENFIELD** – Nobody in Franklin County has been evicted since the state moratorium ended two months ago, but the sheriff’s office continues to serve pre-eviction notices and court summonses while trying to connect tenants with as many resources as possible.

“It is very troubling, because we are obligated to follow the law, but we try to be humane as well,” sheriff Christopher Donelan told the Reporter. “We can slow the process down, but ultimately we’re required by law to serve the papers by the court.”

According to US Census Bureau statistics, 6.7 million people are at risk of eviction in the coming months nationwide. In Massachusetts, that includes about 146,000 renters and homeowners.

For six months between April and October, housing courts in Massachusetts shut down following



REPORTER STAFF PHOTO  
The company managing this apartment complex in Orange served seven tenants court summonses on Monday, but says it will help them access emergency assistance.

a state-ordered halt to all “non-essential” evictions, which expired on October 17. Since then the Franklin County sheriff’s office has delivered dozens of pre-eviction notices and at least 54 “summary process

see RENTAL page A9

## “Complexity of the Transition” Causes Delays in Farren Closure



MIKE JACKSON PHOTO  
A promise to provide COVID-19 vaccination to the facility’s residents before they are moved to a Holyoke home has cast uncertainty on the timeline.

By JEFF SINGLETON

**MONTAGUE CITY** – The Farren Care Center, which began as a hospital at the turn of the last century and has served for nearly thirty years as a home to over 100 long-term residents with multiple disabilities, remains on track to close this winter, but the time frame has been delayed until at least February and perhaps later.

Originally scheduled to shut its doors at the end of 2020, the Farren’s closing was initially delayed until January 5, according to an announcement by Trinity Health Senior Communities, a Michi-

gan-based organization which owns the unique facility. The December 1 announcement stated that the postponement was due to “the complexity of the transition before us,” as well as a desire to maintain “consistency in staffing and operations.”

The majority of Farren residents are to be moved to a nursing home in Holyoke owned by Trinity called Mount Saint Vincent Care Center, which has served a very different population of elderly residents, mostly in their 80s and 90s. The current population of the Farren is 85 residents, according to Trinity spokesperson Christine Looby.

see FARREN page A4

## DISPATCH

### The Moody Blues, Part II On the Threshold of a Dream?

By CHIPAINSWORTH

**NORTHFIELD** – The Northfield planning board met on Thursday, December 17 with a Kansas money man and his Missouri architect to go over plans to put a \$13 million condominium complex on eight-tenths of an acre in historic East Northfield.

The key players for Northfield were planning board chair Steve Seredynski, vice chair Meg Riordan, and members Homer Stavely, Tammy Pelletier, and Joe Graveline. The development team was represented by Christian Arnold of Clockwork Architecture in Kansas City, Missouri, and James Spencer, the chief operating officer of the Moody Center in Over-

land Park, Kansas, a hub of the Christian non-profit industry.

Earlier in the week, media operations specialist Aleana Saldana of the Moody Church in Chicago confirmed: “We are not affiliated with the Moody Center in Overland Park, Ks.”

No indeed, Moody Center’s *raison d’être* was thanks to the National Christian Foundation’s decision to give its Northfield property to Thomas Aquinas College and the Moody Center. The former now uses it for education, and the latter for profiteering.

“We already gave you permission to build [two other projects], where’s that?” asked Seredynski.

Still in the planning stages, see MOODY page A2

## SO LONG, 2020!



ABBE SCHWITZ PHOTO

Gus Beauchaine of Montague enjoys the snow. Happy New Year to our readers!

### Extra Pages Because We’ll Be Sleeping All Next Week

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summons and complaints,” court orders requiring tenants to appear in court on a specific date. Alongside these notices, the sheriff’s office provides information about rent relief programs, legal aid, and food assistance.

“We’re a very compassionate county, I believe,” Donelan said. “Our approach from the very beginning was to contact all the attorneys and social service agencies in Franklin County who assist renters when they’re in trouble.”

The largest available pool of assistance is the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program, originally designed to provide one-time financial aid to families facing homelessness. During the pandemic, the upper limit for RAFT has been increased from \$4,000 to \$10,000.

Governor Charlie Baker’s Eviction Diversion Initiative, introduced after the state moratorium ended, pledged \$100 million to the RAFT program, as well as \$12.3 million towards legal aid for tenants and landlords and \$50 million towards emergency rehousing.

Community Legal Aid (CLA), which provides free legal service for low-income defendants in central and western Massachusetts, was one of six such organizations in the state to receive funding under the Initiative. With the additional money, the organization has been able to add 20 more case-workers to their staff of about 100.

“We are taking in every eviction case that comes to us now, which is huge and expansive and exciting,” said Jennifer Dieringer, CLA’s managing attorney for Franklin, Hampshire, and Berkshire counties. “RAFT funding is helpful, but it’s not a forever thing, and at some point these folks are going to be on their own,” Dieringer said. “There are still gaps, and I think for us what we see in our evictions cases is that there is always something underlying the eviction issue.”

With the additional case managers, Dieringer said CLA can now help defendants with other forms of assistance, such as assistance in accessing food stamps, veterans’ benefits, or addiction services.

Meanwhile, all housing court hearings for the four western Massachusetts counties are taking place each day on one busy Zoom session, with the same judge, clerk magistrate, and housing specialist overseeing all cases. Dieringer said the on-line format is slowing down the process, and complicating their work.

**Waiting For RAFT**

On Monday, seven housing court summonses were issued for residents at King Pine Apartments, a subsidized housing complex in Orange. Among the residents who received the court orders was Autumn Upham, a co-organizer of the Black Lives Matter marches in Greenfield and Turners Falls this summer.

“I was a waitress and made decent money before this,” Upham said. “COVID has put me in this spot, for sure. Unemployment is nothing close to what I’m used to making.”

With two children to take care of, Upham said that half of her post-COVID income was going towards food until she was approved for food stamps last month. After she fell behind on rent payments, King Pine’s management company, Schochet Companies (a.k.a. Feder-

al Management Co.), contacted her about applying for emergency rental assistance.

“They have reached out a couple times advising me about RAFT, and then asking if I had applied, which I told them I did,” Upham, who has lived at King Pine for four and a half years, told the Reporter. “I’m not sure if they have to send out these summons for eviction just because of protocol, or what.”

According to Dieringer, even if an eviction case is resolved, whether through full payment, negotiations, or mediation by the court housing specialist, it can still leave a mark on a tenant’s record, making it harder to secure housing in the future.

“There seems to be a disparity across the state to how RAFT has flowed,” said Schochet Companies chief operating officer David Flad. Schochet manages King Pine on behalf of its owner, the national faith-based organization Retirement Housing Foundation (RHF).

King Pine was originally two adjacent complexes: Pine Crest Apartments, which catered to low-income residents, and King James Court, reserved for the elderly and disabled. The two were officially combined in 2019 after RHF received \$11.6 million from MassHousing through state income tax credits, bonds, and loans to renovate and preserve the 234-unit complex. The non-profit owns nearly 200 subsidized housing communities nationwide.

According to Flad, of the 26 subsidized housing communities Schochet manages in New England, 15 are dedicated to elderly and disabled tenants who receive Section 8 subsidies; the remainder have been “significantly economically impacted” by the pandemic.

“We’re in the affordable housing business, and our goal always and forever is to preserve tenancy,” said Schochet president and CEO Richard Henken. “We deal with folks who have fallen on hard times, and we do everything in our power to work with them.”

In Massachusetts, Flad said, rental assistance appears to be inconsistently distributed. “Some got RAFT money in July and August without being threatened with eviction,” he told the Reporter, “but places like King Pine have a very high percentage of folks who haven’t been able to get RAFT money.... King Pine is one of the properties where we’ve been watching delinquencies very closely. The numbers are starting to creep up.”

Upham said she receives rental subsidies through Section 8, but without regular income, she was simply unable to keep up on her portion of the payments. She is not alone: according to Flad, 28 households at King Pine are behind on rent.

“I feel like something like that may be hard on some people, mentally, who are struggling so badly right now,” Upham said. “If I didn’t feel like I was going to get the help from RAFT, I’d be a mess right now after receiving that summons.”

**Maintaining Tenancy**

“Industry wide there are lots of landlords like us who really work hard to maintain tenancy and take care of folks,” Henken said. “In this world, nobody wants a vacancy.”

A federal eviction moratorium enacted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), set to expire on December 31, will be extended through January if the omnibus

relief package approved by Congress on Monday becomes law. The protection offered by the CDC is limited; to qualify, tenants must file an affidavit testifying that they are pursuing all available forms of emergency aid.

The bailout bill also includes \$25 billion for rental assistance, \$600 one-time direct payments to individuals, and a \$300 per week increase to unemployment benefits. As of Wednesday the outgoing president has threatened to veto the bill unless the individual checks are increased to \$2,000.

At the state level, the budget finalized last week includes an additional \$55 million for RAFT, and protects any tenant seeking assistance through the program from eviction. It also allocates an additional \$4.75 million for housing counseling.

Locally, resources and personnel brought together through the Opioid Task Force have shifted to help address the new crisis created by the pandemic.

“We had the relationships and public health model from fighting the opioid crisis,” Donelan explained, “and we pivoted to COVID with the same people, the same relationships, and the same models.”

As sheriff for 10 years now, Donelan said homelessness in Franklin County seems worse today than when he was first elected. “I think a lot of this has to do with mental health and substance abuse issues,” he told the Reporter. “With the Opioid Task Force, we’ve been working hard to support homeless shelters and warming centers, to at least keep them safe and alive during the winter.”

While the court system is not an ideal means of dealing with the compounding crisis, Donelan said helpful staff members from the Greenfield Court Service Center and CLA have been working to get information and resources to people in need before they lose their homes.

“So far we haven’t had that dilemma, because the judges have been very compassionate, and the courts,” Donelan said.

Still, a backlog of pending eviction cases is sitting in the Western Housing Court. 800 cases were in the pipeline before the moratorium was enacted last April, according to housing court clerk Christina Thompson, and fresh filings are being added each week.

This month, for example, another notice to quit was sent to a resident of the Leisure Woods Estates mobile home park in Orange, bringing the total number of pre-eviction notices there to 12. Before his tenure as sheriff, Donelan was a state legislator who sat on the Massachusetts Manufactured Home Commission, and he said he remembers receiving complaints from residents of Leisure Woods.

“I can say this company that owns Leisure Woods is a notoriously nasty landlord, with a long history of not-nice behavior,” Donelan said. “It wouldn’t surprise me that they would take advantage of the pandemic to get these people out of there.”

Though any potential evictions at Leisure Woods are subject to review by a Mobile Home Rent Control Board in Orange, recent requests to that board and the Orange selectboard for information on the pending cases have gone unanswered.

The patchwork system of efforts



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## LOOKING BACK: 10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

*Here's the way it was on December 23, 2010: News from the Montague Reporter's archive.*

**Erving Spends First, Then Meets With Montague**

The town of Erving has proposed adding \$70,000 to Montague’s annual bill to help cover capital costs at the Erving side wastewater treatment plant, which the town of Montague shares. The proposal came toward the end of a December 16 meeting between the selectboards of the two towns, who came together at Erving’s request to discuss the joint agreement governing cost sharing at the plant.

“Not bad for a first meeting... very civilized” said Erving administrative coordinator Tom Sharp.

Sewer systems were certainly one of the early hallmarks of civilization, but the agreement between the towns to share costs on maintaining the treatment plant in 1973 might have just been ancient history if the Erving board had not unearthed it earlier this year.

Unfortunately, Erving had already gone ahead on its own and spent \$5.6 million to renovate the treatment plant on the Erving side of the Millers River without notifying Montague in advance.

The meeting last Thursday was an attempt to bring both towns to the table to talk about the past agreement, how the cost of current improvements should be divided, and what should happen next.

According to the 1973 agreement, Montague should share the costs of any upgrade at the treatment plant proportionally to the amount of flow it contributes to it. Now that the Millers Falls paper mill is closed, Montague contributes about half the flow to the plant.

Montague currently pays approximately \$166,000 per year to Erving in sewer user fees, but if it were to share half the capital costs for the recent upgrade, it would result in Montague paying Erving an additional \$230,000 per year, according to initial estimates.

**The Strathmore Mill: A River Runs Through It**

“A phenomenal amount of water” poured through one of the Strathmore Mill buildings on Friday night, December 10,” said Montague building inspector David Jensen, after a pipe in the building’s sprinkler system broke.

“It is part of a dry release system,” Jensen told the selectboard on Monday. “But when the pipe broke, it charged the system, and it just rained down all five levels. There’s still ice on the floors. Most of it ended up in the basement.”

Jensen, who has been working with members of the highway department to drain down the system, said ice in one of the lines was the likely culprit in Friday’s debacle.

December temperatures this year have been colder than last, noted Jensen, and selectboard chair Pat Allen agreed. “Global warming is fickle, isn’t it?” Jensen said, on a day in which he was called to the Strathmore Mill complex three times to investigate problems there.

On the plus side, Jensen enumerated a few successful projects completed at the Strathmore since the town took ownership of the mill in March of this year: more debris from the 2007 arson fire was removed, “Franklin County inmates have cleared out a bunch of recycling,” and many points of possible illegal access to the mill have been blocked.



to bridge the gap between tenants and landlords appears to be holding up – at least for now. But if the housing court begins sending his office notices to carry out evictions, in Orange or elsewhere in Franklin County, Donelan says he

will have no choice but to comply. “Housing insecurity is bad for everybody,” Donelan said. “To me it’s all a huge moral dilemma all wrapped into one. Evicting anybody, any time, is a bad thing.”



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