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Climate change@HOME

Toolkit helps towns overcome solar barriers

UMass Clean Energy Extension
develops guide to planning
municipal power sources

By **BELLA LEVAVI**
Staff Writer

AMHERST — It takes a lot of planning to get a solar panel installed. Municipalities must find solar resources in their town, create GIS maps to identify optimal solar locations, assess options for solar infrastructure and conduct a fi-

nancial assessment — all before a solar developer comes in. As small towns lacking skilled green energy employees struggle to perform these tasks, the University of Massachusetts Amherst’s Clean Energy Extension has come up with a solution. The Clean Energy Extension has worked over the past several years to develop a toolkit that small, under-sourced municipalities can use to help develop solar energy. The extension partnered with Westhampton, Wendell and Blandford to create a pilot program and a roadmap of steps that towns across Mas-

sachusetts can take to develop a plan for adding solar power to their energy portfolios. Research fellow Zara Dowling explained the toolkit creates realistic scenarios that towns can work with to develop plans. The toolkits do not try to generate all of a town’s energy from solar or place solar panels in improbable places, but instead help communities develop plans that work for their needs. By following the toolkits, municipalities can have plans for solar energy in months to a year. River Strong, associate director of

UMass’ Clean Energy Extension, explained there is often conflict when solar developers come into a community looking to create large-scale solar installations, which can lead to communities enacting moratoriums to prevent such development. The toolkit provides ways to alleviate the conflict with tips for meetings at which to explain solar energy, along with surveys about it for residents. “The toolkit is about planning, not doing it,” explained Dowling, who also

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MILLERS FALLS

Community rallies to help Bridge Street fire victims

‘Heartwarming’: Element Brewing Co. fundraiser collected more than \$1,000

By **JULIAN MENDOZA**
Staff Writer

MILLERS FALLS — Element Brewing Co.’s fundraiser raised more than \$1,000 on Wednesday for the Verchot family, who lost their home in a devastating fire at 20 Bridge St. earlier this month. Ben Anhalt, who co-owns the brewery alongside Dan Kramer, said the fundraiser’s turnout was “a lot better than anticipated.” Kramer emphasized that this was particularly impressive because the brewery is not typically open on Wednesday nights. “People have been coming in all day, which is really cool to see,” Anhalt said. “A lot of people here tonight aren’t regular customers,” Kramer added, “but they came out to support the community, and it’s heartwarming to see people come out.” While regular customers may not have made up a large percentage of the evening’s attendance, those who came predominantly lived nearby. Anhalt particularly glowed as he observed Montague town officials among the crowd. “It’s great that people are out tonight in full force,” Anhalt said, scanning the room and counting heads. “I’m just looking around the bar right now, and it’s like, ‘local, local, local, local.’” Some neighbors stopped by Wednesday solely to drop off goods and monetary donations, the co-own-

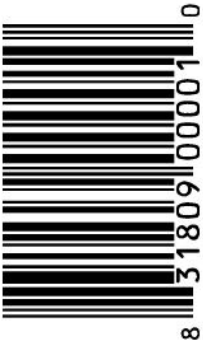
SEE BREWPUB A8



STAFF PHOTO/JULIAN MENDOZA
Element Brewing Co. held a fundraiser on Wednesday for the Verchot family, who lost their home to a fire at 20 Bridge St. in Millers Falls on Nov. 8.

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GREENFIELD/NORTHFIELD



STAFF PHOTO/JULIAN MENDOZA
Kirsten Levitt and Matt Goulet, at left in white aprons, oversee volunteers preparing Thanksgiving meals for Stone Soup Cafe’s distribution event in Greenfield on Thursday.

Residents from ‘every walk of life’ convene for Thanksgiving meals

In Northfield, second-year organizers were on mission to ‘elevate what they do’; Stone Soup Cafe marked Indigenous Day of Mourning and prepared for hundreds of holiday guests

By **JULIAN MENDOZA**
Staff Writer

Acknowledging that the world can be rife with inequity and hardship, local meals program organizers did their part to ensure everyone had a Thanksgiving dinner this year. “It’s such a good feeling to be able to feed people,” said Lisa DeWitt, site coordinator for the Franklin County Community Meals Program event, held Thursday at Northfield’s Trinitarian Congregational Church. “Leading up to it, I think it can be nerve-

wracking because I want everything to be perfect ... but afterwards, I’m going to feel good.” In partnership with the First Parish Unitarian Church, the Franklin County Community Meals Program and Trinitarian Congregational Church offered a Thanksgiving meal from 1 to 2 p.m. It was the second Thanksgiving the program has held in Northfield, according to DeWitt, who said organizers have been on a mission to “elevate what (they) do.” This, she said, has involved procuring

“good, quality, fresh food” from local farms and providing options for those with dietary restrictions. “My family’s going to come here and eat, too,” she said. “I have to put it in my mouth. I want to feed people the same quality I feed my kids.” More than 100 reservations had been made in advance of Thursday afternoon. To meet this demand, the program’s dozen volunteers readied the church with a spread of

SEE SCORES OF VOLUNTEERS A8

WARWICK

Town setting up nonprofit to aid school reopening

Attorney tapped to guide efforts to form entity that could raise funds

By **JULIAN MENDOZA**
Staff Writer

WARWICK — The Selectboard has agreed to a contract with attorney T. Wilson Flanders as the town looks to establish a nonprofit educational organization to support its efforts to reopen and revitalize the former Warwick Community School, which closed in 2020.

The nonprofit that Flanders will help establish will benefit the town’s “Rural School Redesign” efforts. With Flanders’ counsel, the town hopes to have documentation prepared for filing as a tax-exempt 501(c)3 nonprofit by January. Speaking during this week’s Selectboard meeting, Town Coordinator David Young described Flanders as “a good, level-headed attorney,” adding that “this kind of practice suits him.” Flanders’ scope of work will include meeting with Young; drafting the nonprofit’s articles of organization and bylaws; completing an IRS Form 1023 application for

tax-exempt status and related documents; and teaching Warwick how to maintain the corporation and tax-exempt status in good standing. The initial fee is \$2,500, plus unanticipated hourly pay of \$250 and fees relative to paying other entities during the filing process. Warwick plans to draw from a grant-funded \$215,000 New Schools Venture Fund budget to pay for Flanders’ services. According to Susan Hollins, senior consultant for the Rural School Redesign team,

SEE WARWICK A8



Dwayne Breger, left, director of the University of Massachusetts Amherst's Clean Energy Extension, Zara Dowling, research fellow, and River Strong, associate director, outside the extension office at UMass Amherst.

Toolkit can expedite town solar

FROM A1

serves on the New Salem Selectboard, Conservation Commission and Energy Committee.

"The next step after using the toolkit is getting a solar developer involved," said Dwayne Breger, director of the Clean Energy Extension.

Of working with the Clean Energy Extension, Wendell Energy Committee member and Selectboard Chair Laurie DiDonato said, "They did a really great job. They were able to get a feel of what the town wanted through their surveys and forums."

Wendell has already received an extensive plan on how to move to solar.

"Wendell is a bit unique," DiDonato said when asked if she thinks Wendell was a good town to use for the pilot program. She explained residents care deeply about forest conservation, and that can often be at odds with solar projects. DiDonato ultimately decided the toolkit helped the town advance its planning, and can help demonstrate steps other small towns can take.

Many towns already have Open Space and Recreation Plans, Strong explained. These plans can be used to guide solar energy when municipalities are not pressed for new buildings.

"There is a tension that is created," Dowling said. "There is a need for clean en-

ergy in the east and open space in the west. The state will need to work together to solve this problem."

Even though the toolkit has steps to follow, it can still be hard for small towns to have the staffing to do the work. The Clean Energy Extension has created a class through the iCons program to assist towns. ICons is a certificate program through the university that teaches real-world problem-solving focused in biomedicine/biosystems and renewable energy.

The program has a year-long senior capstone class where students are trained to use the toolkit, and then get paired with a town to help create a plan. This is the first year for the class, and about 13 students are enrolled.

Dowling has been increasing the number of towns participating in the program, which now include Ashfield, Montague and Monterey, among others.

"This class is a three-way partnership between Clean Energy Extension, the students and the towns," Strong said.

The project is 50% funded by the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources and 50% funded by external funding with competitive applications.

The Clean Energy Extension was created in 2015 by the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources.

Breger explained that UMass has a long history of extension services, being a land grant college. Much research at the university has been done to benefit the local community. Historically, that research has been largely focused on agriculture, which has been expanded to research in clean energy.

The extension service has a small four-person staff, as well as graduate and undergraduate students. It also has associated programs, including the Green Energy Corps.

"The state using universities to work against climate change speaks to the leadership of the state," Breger said.

Dowling explained their research is contributing to the state goal of reducing carbon emissions by 50% by 2030.

"We are not the only ones working on this. People are doing great things to get the planning in place to get up to state targets," Dowling said.

Other solar research the extension is working on includes siting solar panels on farm fields. The service has received a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy for this research for the next three years, which Breger called a hopeful step forward.

With the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act, solar panel incentives have been increased. The employees at the extension are unsure how this will affect the projects specifically, but they said it will likely help the development of solar panels on public buildings.

"This work will not solve climate change," Breger said, "but we are working with students who are well equipped and enthusiastic to get into the clean energy workforce."

Bella Levavi can be reached at 413-930-4579 or blevavi@recorder.com.

Scores of volunteers help cafe prepare meal

FROM A1

soup, turkey and gravy, mashed potatoes, stuffing, roasted vegetables, cranberry sauce and dessert.

"I love the idea of a community meal and bringing everybody from every walk of life together for a meal," Dewitt said, noting that she feels the event is an occasion to "forget social status."

Recognition of diverse backgrounds was likewise at the forefront of what Greenfield's Stone Soup Cafe organized for Thanksgiving. The cafe at All Souls Church hosted A Day of Mourning and Thanks Giving, recognizing and honoring Indigenous people.

Executive Director and Chef Kirsten Levitt said the cafe paused meal preparations at noon to stream the National Day of Mourning, an annual demonstration held to educate people about Native American history and culture, as a way to "stand in solidarity" with the millions of Indigenous people who have been "marginalized" throughout the country's history.

"I've never been able to go to the Day of Mourning, so to be able to sit in was extremely moving and emotional for me," she said Thursday afternoon. "It just brought home again that our nation needs to wake

up and look at what's happening and how institutional white supremacy makes striations ... that don't need to exist."

Between 130 and 150 volunteers banded together to assist with this year's Thanksgiving meal distribution at Stone Soup Cafe, Levitt estimated. The group, which Levitt said is "deeply committed to creating a sense ... of welcoming or belonging," thoughtfully recognized the Day of Mourning. They "felt really powerful and embodied" upon their return to the kitchen, she said, where they prepared enough food for 700 people.

"There's been more people here helping ... than we've ever had," shift leader Matt Goulet said.

Levitt said that before Thanksgiving, she grew wary that embracing such a custom of abundance and indulgence on Thanksgiving might inherently be upholding white supremacist tradition. Upon consulting local tribal representatives, though, she was told that her Thanksgiving efforts would just be "another day of giving thanks."

"Every day that we serve a meal at the cafe is giving thanks," Levitt said.

Reach Julian Mendoza at 413-930-4231 or jmendoza@recorder.com.

Warwick school aiming to reopen

FROM A1

the idea of having a nonprofit corporation that addresses non-school initiatives was first discussed in 2019 as part of designing a school budget.

"I address entrepreneurial revenue when talking about small school sustainability to help everyone think about possible new sources of revenue — initiatives that are not strictly related to a public school's operation," she wrote in a message to Young.

Young said establishing a nonprofit would avoid the issue of a municipal government directly fundraising, which could be construed as soliciting bribery.

"What we're trying to do is generate revenues, not ways to spend it," he added. "This is not a revolving fund."

"I think it will be really useful for raising money," commented Warwick Founding Superintendent Carole Learned-Miller.

In her message, Hollins recapped a list of discussed ideas that the nonprofit could enable, including theme meals, developing the 25-acre campus as an environmental education and arts center, development programs for education professionals, "Art and Adventure Days" for families, an outdoor performance space, and conferences and other things that may not necessarily be specific to the school or district.

The Pioneer Valley Regional School District School Committee voted in January 2020 to close Warwick Community School as a cost-saving measure, a decision that state Education Commis-



STAFF FILE PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ

The former Warwick Community School closed in 2020.

sioner Jeffrey Riley approved in May 2020. Since then, members of the Warwick Education Committee have held meetings to develop plans with the goal of reopening the school.

Recently, Pioneer officials approved the three agreements necessary for the Warwick Community School to transition out of the Pioneer Valley Regional School District.

"(Roughly around) 2019, our town started realizing this regional district was no longer a good fit for Warwick for several reasons, including: other towns starting to decide what was best for Warwick children, regional administrators publicly taking action against a Warwick school committee member (and) disagreements about how our student tuition costs were being framed to support ending our town's school program," Hollins contextualized on the Rural School Redesign website.

According to the website, the next chapter of Warwick Community School would be place-based, meaning studies would be socially and environmentally relevant to War-

wick.

"We believe small schools in rural towns bring the community together, create meaningful economic and civic opportunities, and give children a sense of confidence, allowing them to explore learning to the fullest extent," the website reads. "Warwick's location, natural resources, and passionate citizens make it a remarkable place for children to learn and grow together."

Warwick officials plan for the elementary school to be very small, and the town does not plan to have teachers in front of classes teaching traditional lessons to a group of students all the same age. Instead, there will be individualized plans for each student to learn on their own.

"A small school has the luxury of balancing group projects and learning with highly individualized instruction," the website reads. "Multi-grade classrooms mean that students can advance to more challenging work when they are ready and also have the support they need to build their skills, regardless of their chronological age."

Brewpub hosts fire fundraiser

FROM A1

ers said. Kramer highlighted the contribution of a \$200 gift card courtesy of the Leo's Table restaurant in South Deerfield. Kramer has previously noted that since the Verchots are now living in a hotel, donations of gift cards to local restaurants and stores would be especially helpful.

In addition to the brewery donating 75% of sales, apple crisp from Whistle Stop Cafe was served at the fundraiser, with all proceeds supporting the Verchot family. The evening also included a performance by Springfield musician John Mlynick, who said he felt inclined to help after seeing the fire.

"I was outside taking a break, and one of my thoughts was, 'What are we thankful for?'" Mlynick said. "We all have a place to go tonight. That family doesn't, besides a hotel."

The fire destroyed the Verchots' two-family home at 20 Bridge St. — just down the street from Element Brewing Co. — on Nov. 8. It resulted in the death of 66-year-old Judy Verchot, as well as two cats.

Granddaughter Janelle Verchot previously said her



STAFF PHOTO/JULIAN MENDOZA

Springfield musician John Mlynick performs Wednesday at Element Brewing Co.'s fundraiser for the Verchot family, who lost their home to a fire at 20 Bridge St. in Millers Falls.

mother, who declined to comment, and her husband, Jacobo Roque, were home when the fire started and were able to escape. Six-year-old Colton Roque, Judy Verchot's grandson, was rescued by passersby before first responders arrived. Harry Chapin, Judy Verchot's boyfriend who also lived at the house, was driving home when the fire started.

Fire officials have said preliminary evidence suggests that the cause of the fire does not appear suspicious. The in-

cident remains under investigation by the Turners Falls Fire Department, Montague police, and State Police assigned to the State Fire Marshal's Office and Northwestern District Attorney's Office.

Those who would like to donate on the Verchot family's GoFundMe page can do so at gofund.me/77725ce8. As of Thursday, the page had raised nearly \$7,900.

Reach Julian Mendoza at 413-930-4231 or jmendoza@recorder.com.

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