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Headlines 2
Culture..... 6
Business10
Government & Politics19
Education..... 25
Sports..... 30
Stay Connected33



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HEADLINES



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MILFORD TO IMPLEMENT HISTORY, FINANCIAL LITERACY LEARNING

BY TERRY ROGERS

At a recent Milford Board of Education meeting, Dr. Bridget Amory, director of Student Learning, told board members that the district was working to address recent legislation that would require schools to include specific types of curricula. The district must include lessons on black history, the Holocaust and genocide, as well as financial literacy.

“Our Social Studies task force has been working to address some of the legislation,” Amory said. “House Bill 198, known as the Black History Bill, requires all public schools to provide instruction on black history. The financial literacy bill is intended to increase the financial literacy of all Delaware students and the Holocaust bill requires students in grades six through 12 to learn about the Holocaust and genocide in each one of those grade levels at least one time each academic year.”

According to Amory, the district is working with the Department of Education and the Social Studies coalition as well as curriculum directors throughout the state to help guide them in the process. At this time, the methods

for incorporating the subjects are not finalized but the district anticipates rolling out the new curriculums in the next school year.

House Bill 198, introduced in March by Dorsey Walker, requires each school district and charter school to establish and implement a curriculum on black history for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The bill passed both the Senate and the House in the spring with about a dozen dissenting votes and was signed by Gov. John Carney in June 2021.

According to the language of the bill, each district must teach the history and culture of black people, the significance of enslavement in America, the relationship between white supremacy, racism and American slavery as well as the central role racism played during the Civil War. The curriculum must also include details on the tragedy of enslavement and how it was perpetuated through segregation, the contributions of black people to American life, history and more plus the socio-

See **LEARNING** on page 4



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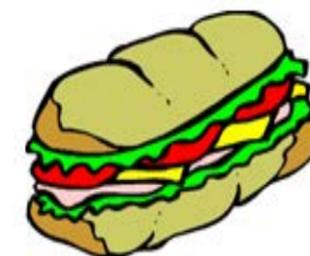
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LEARNING from page 3

economic struggle black people endured and continue to endure. The curriculum must also feature black figures in both national and Delaware history.

House Bill 318, the Holocaust Bill, requires students in grades six through 12 to learn about the Holocaust and genocide in an effort to cultivate the spirit of human resilience, courage, heroism and tolerance. The law passed the Senate in June 2020 and the House in January 2020 with no dissenting votes. The law was signed by the governor in July 2020.

The bill states that every district must include curriculum that examines the ramifications of prejudice, racism and intolerance while preparing students to be responsible citizens. The curriculum should reaffirm the commitment of free people to never allow such an occurrence in the future and prepare students to confront the inhumanity of the Holocaust, genocide, slavery, and other acts of mass violence. The bill is designed to promote cultural diversity and promote an understanding of international law designed to prevent such horrific events again.

The final bill that districts must implement relates to financial literacy. House Joint Resolution 4, sponsored by Ruth Briggs King, established a task force to determine the level of financial literacy education provided to students in Delaware. In 2018, the State Board of Education adopted new K-12 Financial Literacy Standards that included financial literacy education. Financial literacy education will grow more involved as children move up in grade levels, starting with simple concepts

See LEARNING on page 5



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LEARNING from page 4

like the different skills needed for jobs, the need to plan for spending in a household, how to save money and how to plan for unexpected risks at the elementary level.

When students reach high school, they will be provided instruction on assessing the consequences of financial decisions, how earning, spending and saving can help them achieve goals, establishing budgets, learning the benefits of payment options, the importance of credit history and the role of government when it comes to saving and investments.



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CULTURE



Photo BY TERRY ROGERS

SURF FISHING TAGS SELL OUT HOURS AFTER GOING ON SALE



BY CHARLIE MEGGINSON

The Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control announced Feb. 1 that Delaware standard surf fishing permits sold out just hours after going on sale. The announcement came after sales reached the cap of 17,000 standard tags issued for the 2022 calendar year.

While no more standard surf fishing permits that allow fishing anytime will be sold until the 2023 season, the popular off-peak permits introduced by DNREC last year are still available and allow fishing all days except summer weekends and holidays.

In 2019, the Delaware Parks and Recreation Advisory Council established a 17,000 cap on standard surf fishing permit sales. According to the DNREC Division of Parks and Recreation, it implemented a first-come, first-served

cap on the number of permits issued “as the most equitable way to serve all beach users, and to manage a limited resource, while also protecting against overcrowding of parks beaches.”

Tags ordinarily go on sale much earlier, but this year the sales were delayed because of nationwide supply chain disruptions.

Off-peak surf fishing permits still available

While sales of standard surf fishing permits have ended for 2022, off-peak surf fishing permits are still available. There is no cap on the number of off-peak surf fishing permits, which were **piloted** in 2021.

Off-peak surf fishing permits may be used seven days

See SURF on page 8



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SURF from page 7

a week during the off-season, which runs from Feb. 1 to May 29 and again from Sept. 6 through Dec. 31.

From Memorial Day through Labor Day, off-peak permits may only be used Mondays through Fridays. Memorial Day, July 4th and Labor Day are excluded. The off-peak permit also allows entry into all Delaware State Parks without paying the daily entrance fee.

The off-peak permit fee for Delaware residents is \$70, while the fee for out-of-state residents is \$140. Delaware residents age 62 and older will receive a discounted rate of \$60. To purchase an off-peak surf fishing permit, go to www.destateparks.com or visit any park office within Delaware State Parks. For surf fishing rules, regulations and other important information, go to www.destateparks.com/adventures/fishing.



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LABOR DEPT. SAYS FRAUD BEHIND MANY UNEMPLOYMENT DELAYS

BY CHARLIE MEGGINSON

After Milford resident Candice Hamilton was let go from her health care job in November 2021 she immediately filed for unemployment. After receiving her benefits for three weeks, the payments stopped.

In late December, Hamilton was told by a Department of Labor caseworker that her claim is in a queue awaiting assignment to a claims deputy and that there was a backlog of “around 135 days.”

Despite those delays, during a recent Joint Finance Committee hearing, the Department of Labor did not request any additional funds to hire more adjudicators or increase training for existing claims deputies.

That’s because the Department of Labor’s Unemployment Insurance Section does not receive its funding through the state’s General Fund, but rather from federal and state taxes on employers, and federal grants that would have to be approved by the State Clearinghouse Committee.

The agency saw more unemployment claims than ever

before, including during the recessions in 2001 and 2009. Amidst those claims, officials said, were unprecedented levels of fraudulent applications that had to be identified and adjudicated.

Among the agency’s requests to the Joint Finance Committee are \$42,000 to hire a full-time marketing specialist.

“This outreach and marketing work is key as we know that many Delawareans miss training opportunities, job search assistance, expungement services, case management services, and much more,” said Karryl Hubbard, secretary of the Delaware Department of Labor.

“We are also focused on promoting awareness, access, diversity, inclusion and apprenticeship by offering targeted supports to encourage participants from underrepresented groups such as women, persons with disabilities and others from ethnic minority backgrounds,” Hubbard said.

See FRAUD on page 12

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FRAUD from page 11

The secretary argued that an enhanced marketing budget is critical to inform Delawareans of virtual and on-site job fairs throughout the state.

The department also requested \$85,000 to pay for the promotions of labor law enforcement officers.

“The division of industrial affairs requests increased spending authority to support career ladders for the growth of officers from labor law officer II to labor law enforcement officer III,” Hubbard said. “Also we plan to reclass current labor law enforcement supervisors from pay grade 15 to 17 to create career paths and growth opportunities within the unit.”

The agency’s final request in the amount of \$12,000 is for members of the Worker’s Compensation team to attend training and conferences.

“Attending trainings and conferences will provide networking among their peers across the country and encourage the development of new skills and adoption of best practices from across the nation,” the secretary said.

Two legislators asked questions relating to frustrations with delays in claimants receiving benefits.

“In the last year and a half, particularly in addition to the greater number increase in claims is the issue of fraudulent claims that just come in and slow your system down,” said Sen. Bruce Ennis, D-Smyrna. “But I just don’t understand how anybody who files a fraudulent claim can be successful because even if the claim is honored and no one knows it’s fraudulent, it goes to the individual address and not to the person committing the fraud.”

See FRAUD on page 13



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FRAUD from page 12

Darryl Scott, director of Delaware's Unemployment Insurance Office, responded that Delaware's unemployment department and those in states across the nation were faced with attacks "in an organized, sophisticated manner."

"Prior to the pandemic, the primary source of fraud that we detected was related to employees who failed to report wages or fail to report returning to work and we had controls and crosschecks in place to try and identify that," Scott said.

He said that tens of millions of Americans have fallen victim to data breaches, giving sophisticated fraudsters access to information like individuals' dates of birth, social security numbers, home addresses and more.

That, coupled with easy-to-find information on public social media profiles, gives identity thieves all the information they need to navigate the unemployment system and breeze through the identity verification system.

In addition to those sophisticated attacks, Scott said, the division also saw thousands of less intricate fraudulent claims that are easier to catch during the identity verification process.

Hubbard noted that in fiscal year 2020 the department received 186,000 initial claims—nearly six times the total of 32,000 claims received in fiscal year 2019.

"Sixty-two thousand initial claims were received in the first four weeks of the pandemic, March 15 through April 11, and a total of 109,000 claims were received during the first 13 weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic," Hubbard said. "In comparison, at no point during the

See FRAUD on page 14



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FRAUD from page 13

2001 and 2009 recessions did the weekly initial claim volume exceed 4,000 claims in a single week,” she said. “In 2020 the Division had ten consecutive weeks of claim volume greater than 4000 with two largest weeks approaching 19,000 initial claims.”

Sen. Laura Sturgeon, D-Greenville, said that during the pandemic she heard from numerous constituents who were “unable to find satisfaction working directly with unemployment.” Sturgeon said she understood the Department of Labor does not receive its unemployment funding from the state’s General Fund and so it made sense that they didn’t ask for additional funding from the Joint Finance Committee.

That comes as little relief to Hamilton. After her unemployment payments stopped, Hamilton’s husband, Ron, says they were told by a Department of Labor caseworker that her benefits were on hold because her case required adjudication.

The caseworker wasn’t able to provide a timeframe on when an adjudicator would be assigned but noted that they were still working on resolving claims from May 2021.

In December, Hamilton received an email from a caseworker that said, “Your claim is in a queue awaiting assignment to a claims deputy. The backlog is around 135 days. When the claim is assigned, the deputy will reach out to you to collect information about the circumstances of your unemployment. Please continue to submit weekly certifications so if the claim is approved, we can pay all back weeks without further delay.”

In late January, she was finally able to land a part-time job, though she still earns little enough to qualify for

unemployment payments. Nevertheless, shortly after reporting her new job to the Department of Labor in her weekly filing, she received word from the department that her benefits—which she hadn’t been receiving—had been terminated.

After connecting with a caseworker from the department, she was told her case had finally been assigned an adjudicator and she would be contacted directly. That hasn’t happened. “At the end of the day, I would like them to pay my wife what they owe her for unemployment,” Ron Hamilton said. “But the bigger thing that just kept irritating me was, as I researched it online—there’s people losing their houses because they’re not getting their unemployment and that’s just shameful.”

“We don’t want anybody to get in trouble,” he said. “We just want people to be taken care of when they’re down on their luck.”



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RENTER, LANDLORD ADVOCATES DISAGREE OVER SOLUTIONS TO EVICTION CRISIS

BY CHARLIE MEGGINSON

Lawmakers and advocates say a new Delaware Supreme Court rule that allows tenants to be represented by non-lawyer advocates in eviction proceedings will create parity with landlords and mitigate some of the most harmful effects of housing insecurity.

Opponents, including the Delaware Apartment Association, the non-profit group that represents the interests of multi-family rental unit landlords, say efforts and money would be better spent in the form of direct rental assistance.

For the Supreme Court's rule change to have its full intended effect depends on the passage and signing of a bill that's been held up in the House of Representatives since before the legislature recessed in June 2021.

Senate Substitute 1 for Senate Bill 101, sponsored by Sen. Bryan Townsend, D-Brookside, would guarantee the right to counsel in landlord/tenant actions for households that fall below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.

"The bill tries to focus on those most in economic need," Townsend said in an interview with Delaware/

Town Square LIVE News. "The reason for it is because there's a vastly disproportionate percentage of instances in which the landlord has legal counsel or an experienced advocate in court to represent the interests of the landlord, but the tenant does not have legal counsel at all."

Indeed, according to the ACLU of Delaware, 86% of landlords retain legal representation in court eviction proceedings while, on average, only 2% of renters have representation.

"There's a sort of inherent unfairness to that," Townsend said. "If you happen to be one of the very few tenants who has access to counsel and you walk into court and you're sitting there waiting for your proceeding to begin, and you look over and there's another tenant without legal counsel—well, it's very likely that the two of you are going to walk out of the courthouse with quite different outcomes."

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DELAWARE RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION ISSUES DIRE PLEA FOR HELP



BY CHARLIE MEGGINSON

The organization that represents restaurants in Delaware said the industry is far from being out of the woods after two years of the COVID pandemic.

The Delaware Restaurant Association's *2022 State of the Restaurant Industry* report found that restaurants continue to struggle to keep their doors open amid a surge in coronavirus cases, inflation, a labor shortage, and supply chain delays.

"Alarmingly, Delaware's restaurant industry remains down 4,300 jobs from pre-pandemic employment levels," the report says. "Data from [BLS.gov](https://www.bls.gov) shows DE leisure and hospitality jobs at 49,100 in December 2021, down from a high of 53,400 in December 2019."

According to the National Restaurant Association, the United States lost more than 650,000 restaurant and hospitality industry jobs early in the pandemic and still

hasn't recovered. The group found that to be a loss of 45% more than the next closest industry.

The national association is now asking Congress to replenish the Restaurant Revitalization Fund, a now-depleted \$28.6 billion program created by the American Rescue Plan Act that provides emergency assistance for eligible restaurants, bars, and other qualifying businesses impacted by COVID-19.

"It's dangerous to see restaurants open and think that everything is ok and profits have returned," said Carrie Leishman, president and CEO of the Delaware Restaurant Association. "Industry subsidies and relief programs in 2020 helped, but the reality for restaurants is that business conditions are more difficult now than a year ago during the height of the pandemic."

See **HELP** on page 17



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The Delaware association notes in its report that new data collected from Delaware restauranteurs highlights the devastating impact of the Omicron variant and the rapid deterioration in business conditions for Delaware restaurants.

According to the survey, 90% of restaurants experienced a decline in customer demand for indoor on-premises dining in recent weeks, as a result of the increase in coronavirus cases due to the Omicron variant. Eighty-six percent of operators report that business conditions are worse now than three months ago and 80% say their restaurant is less profitable now than it was before the pandemic.

The survey also found that Delaware restaurants took a number of actions in recent weeks as a result of the increase in coronavirus cases due to the Omicron variant.

Among those actions, 70% of those surveyed reduced hours of operation, 50% closed on some days when they would normally be open, 30% reduced seating capacity while seven in 10 employers say their restaurant currently does not have enough employees to support customer demand. Most operators expect their labor challenges to continue throughout 2022.

Data collected from the National Restaurant Association did find that consumer spending in restaurants trended steadily higher during the first half of 2021. That trend was driven by rising vaccination numbers, the easing of capacity restrictions and healthy household balance sheets.

“However, that positive trajectory stalled during the second half of 2021, with sales dropping back below pre-pandemic levels by December 2021—the lowest

monthly reading since August,” the report says, noting a Morning Consult report that found the percentage of U.S. adults who say they feel comfortable dining out has fallen by nine points since Oct. 30, 2021. “To make matters worse, restaurant operators are dealing with a material increase in costs across the board as U.S. inflation hit 7% in December.”

This marks the fastest pace since 1982—“an increase that is tough to swallow for an industry that typically generates, under good conditions, 3-to-5% profit margins. Coupled with the labor inflation necessary to retain enough workers to keep the doors open, we’re finding ourselves in the middle of a malevolent storm,” the association says.

Restaurant survey data also reveals:

- 68% of Delaware restaurant operators report lower sales volume in 2021 than in 2019
- 83% of Delaware restaurant operators say their restaurant costs were higher in December 2021 than December 2020
- 74% of Delaware restaurant operators report slower customer traffic in 2021 than 2019
- 96% of national restaurant operators experienced supply delays or shortages of key food or beverage items in 2021
- More than half of nationwide restaurant operators say it would be a year or more before business conditions return to normal

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COUNCIL HEARS UPDATE ON CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT



BY TERRY ROGERS

At a recent workshop, Milford City Council learned from City Manager Mark Whitfield, Financial Director Lou Vitola, and Cash Operations and Revenue Manager Suzannah Frederick, about how the city's Customer Service Department had overcome obstacles over the past few months. The department dealt with staffing issues, a lobby closure due to COVID and technical problems that led to a significant number of phone calls over the past few months.

"I remember thinking the Customer Service Department had a really good month back in November, with a really nice recovery of some past dues," Vitola said. "So, I wanted to get an update on the books while times were great and then, of course, we've dealt with COVID and staff turnover which is coinciding with this presentation. Suzannah has a great story to tell, she's come a long

way in the time she has been leading the department. What I report on to you is truly to her credit."

Frederick began her presentation by introducing her staff in a slide presentation. She explained that two of the staff members were bilingual and had provided significant assistance to the Spanish-speaking population in Milford. As of Jan. 26, the department was fully staffed although they were still dealing with absences, some related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Frederick, her department processed \$185.9 million in utility payments through cash, check, credit card, online credit card, online echeck and bank EFT methods in 2021. The department handled 20,162 inbound telephone calls and made 8,987 outbound calls, missing only 545 in 2021.

"I think Lou and I were both surprised when we started putting this together and seeing some of the numbers on here," Frederick said. "We've had a lot of growth in the three core utilities over the last year and tax parcels are growing. We issue over 9,000 utility bills each month. But then, on top of that, we have a lot of things that are lower volume but require a lot of demands on time and immediate action. Some of those things are our settlements. We have about 50 settlements a month, but those are all immediate action items we've got that we have continued frequent communication with the attorney's offices and have developed a good working relationship with them. We have high utility transfers around the first, 15th and 30th of each month. That's for most of the rental units and lease holders."

AMI Service software used by the city was recently upgraded which now provides Frederick with daily reports, making it easier to catch leaks so that customers can be notified. With the closure of the Customer Service Department lobby, the city has been encouraging customers to use the online payment service.

"When we ran our telephone report, I was shocked to find out that we answered so many calls and this was just calls outside the company, not my calls to Lou or IT," Frederick said. "We had about 30,000 incoming calls pertaining to everything in the city, trash collection, outages, permit information, utility billing. We did all this with staff levels that, at best, were 75 percent. We were pretty low in cash operations throughout the whole year, so we were always required to pull somebody from customer service, billing and parks over to cash operations. We were constantly juggling customer staffing through

See **SERVICE** on page 21

SERVICE from page 20

the next year.”

Frederick also provided details on how the billing cycle for utilities worked. She explained that delinquent letters go out two days after the bill is due and customers are given nine days before disconnection will occur. Mayor Archie Campbell asked her to explain the disconnection process.

“The city code has that in there that we are required to provide, in writing, when they will be cut off, so that’s why we send out the pink slips or disconnect notices only two days after the bill is due,” Frederick said. ‘If we haven’t received the payment after by Tuesday, we send out the notice just as a second form of communication directly to the customer. And then on the ninth day, we begin disconnecting from payments that were due on that Monday.’ Mayor Campbell asked if the city accepted partial payments before disconnecting and Frederick said that they do try to work with the customer.

Although there are two staff members who speak Spanish, there is not a member of the Customer Service staff that speaks Creole, although Frederick explained they had sought someone who could speak the language. She explained that most residents who speak Creole brought an interpreter with them to assist with any questions. Frederick also provided information on partners the city worked with, including Delaware Municipal Electric Corporation (DEMEC) and organizations who were able to assist customers with utility costs.

“There was a strong push from leadership and council to have a strong presence downtown,” Frederick said.

See SERVICE on page 22

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SERVICE from page 21

“We’ve worked hard to build that and have been part of the Holiday Stroll where residents can come into the office during the stroll. We have a lot of people who benefit from our drive thru.”

Frederick explained that the city has had to be flexible with the staff over the past 18 months, helping many to work remotely. In the beginning, Frederick said they were splitting time working remotely until the past few months when the department was hit hard by COVID. This led the department to allow more employees to work remotely as much as possible. She credited the IT staff with helping them get the technology necessary that allowed staff to work remotely. With the closure of the lobby, the drive thru has been extremely busy with customers who prefer to pay their utility bills in person. Frederick stated that the department was also considering adding service kiosks that could be placed in a well-lit 24-hour location that would allow customers to pay utility bills.

“For employees, we are considering a staggering or flex schedule,” Frederick said. “We have one cash operations clerk now that works 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., but sometimes comes in at 9 a.m. and works till 5:30 p.m. so she can be available for all those customers that come in right around 4:30, we tend to get a rush about 4:25, so that gives us that extra flexibility for customers. We are also considering transitioning somewhere to a remote workforce with a form of hybrid workforce where staff occupied other buildings or work from home in the new Office 365 environment, our VoIP phone systems, smart metering and other things we can do remotely. We still

have a lot of limitations, though. Our current roadblocks are demographics of our residents and customers that are not ready to give us an email address or make an online payment. We have a lot of people that still want to come in and see us face-to-face that want that paper bill in our hand. The internal work order process is still very paper driven and that’s something that will be fixed with our new Tyler software.”

Councilman Dan Marabello asked Frederick what percentage of customers were using the automatic billing method and Frederick responded that she did not have those exact numbers, but indicated that more customers were signing up for the automatic billing option than before. Councilman Marabello also asked if the credit card fees were significant and if the customer was required to pay those fees when paying online. He also suggested offering an incentive to customers, such as a discount on the bill.

“Any ideas like that are welcome,” Frederick said. “That would need to be approved by you, by council. There are fees with credit card payments, and we do absorb that cost for utility payments.”

Councilman Jason James commended Frederick and her department for managing under adverse circumstances over the past few years.

“I know you mentioned a lot about the building, and I know what you are speaking of,” Councilman James said. “I know you’re looking into the future, but I’m still gonna throw this out there to you and hope this is a hard consideration. It is going to sound like giving up, but we need to look at how much of a building we could

need because you know with the systems and the home workers and everyone’s becoming more remote. My job has become used to working remotely. I can also see how having a presence for some is great. For some, the drive thru is really important. My wife always uses it because she refuses to get out of her car. At some point, that building will be more than what we need, so we need to continue to study it. I can see that happens in the near future, but it is just something to consider.”

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NOTICE OF SOLICITATION OF CANDIDATES

BY TERRY ROGERS

The city of Milford Annual Election will be held Saturday, April 23, 2022, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The term of office for the following seats will expire in May 2024:

- Office of Mayor: two year term beginning May 2, 2022
- Councilperson: two year term beginning May 2, 2022 – First Ward
- Councilperson: two year term beginning May 2, 2022 – Second Ward
- Councilperson: two year term beginning May 2, 2022 – Third Ward
- Councilperson: two year term beginning May 2, 2022 – Fourth Ward

In accordance with the city of Milford Charter, not less than sixty (60) days prior to the Annual Election, all candidates for office shall file a nominating petition, stating their name and the office for which he/she is nominated. Mayor petitions shall be signed by not less than ten (10) registered voters in the city of Milford; Council petitions shall be signed by not less than ten (10) registered voters residing in the ward in which the candidate resides.

Candidate Packets and Nominating Petitions can be obtained Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30

p.m. at the City Clerk's Office at Milford City Hall, 201 South Walnut Street, Milford, Delaware. Special times can also be arranged. Please call in advance to schedule an appointment as the building is currently closed as a Covid-19 precaution.

Qualifications for a person filing for office are as follows:

- (1) Citizen of the United States of America;
- (2) Bonafide resident of the city of Milford;
- (3) Office of Mayor—continuously resided in the city of Milford for two years preceding the day of the election;
- Office of Council—continuously resided in the Ward for which he/she is seeking election for one year preceding the day of the election;
- (4) A qualified voter in the city of Milford;
- (5) At least eighteen (18) years of age as of the date of the election;
- (6) Nominated therefore;
- (7) Criminal background check provided from the State Bureau of Identification and Federal Bureau of Investigation showing entire criminal history record;
- (8) No felony convictions or crimes involving moral turpitude.

The deadline to file for the Office of Mayor and/or City Council is Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022, at 4:30 p.m.

Only residents who are registered voters through the state of Delaware are qualified to vote in this election. A separate registration is still required at Milford City Hall for Non-Resident Property Owners who qualify. This can be accomplished by calling the City Clerk's Office. Those registered non-residents who own property in more than one ward, must declare which ward they wish to vote in by Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022. The deadline for new qualified voters to register to vote in this municipal election is Thursday, March 24, 2022, at 4:30 p.m.

Anyone with questions about the eligibility of a non-resident property owner, or who wishes to be put on a list to obtain an affidavit for an absentee ballot, must call the City Clerk's Office at 302-422-1111 ext. 1300 or 1303.



CARNEY STILL DOESN'T SUPPORT LEGAL WEED

BY CHARLIE MEGGINSON

Gov. John Carney said during Feb. 1's weekly COVID-19 briefing that his position on recreational marijuana legalization has not changed: he doesn't support it.

The statement comes as a bill to legalize the cultivation, sale and possession of marijuana in Delaware makes its way through the General Assembly.

House Bill 305, also known as the Delaware Marijuana Control Act, was released last week from the House Health and Human Development Committee Wednesday by a margin of 10 to four. It even earned the support of one Republican—Rep. Mike Smith of Pike Creek.

The bill only requires a 3/5 vote or 60 percent of each chamber, which equates to 25 votes in the House of Representatives and 13 votes in the Senate.

There are currently 26 Democrats in the House of Representatives compared to just 15 Republicans. In the

Senate, Democrats hold 14 seats while Republicans hold seven seats. That means Democrats could pass marijuana legalization without a single Republican vote.

Some speculate that past opposition to cannabis legalization in the General Assembly has come, at least in part, from a desire to avoid forcing Carney into the awkward position of vetoing a bill with such broad public support.

Carney previously has refused to say whether he would veto a recreational legalization bill, citing his attempts as lieutenant governor to “get Delawareans to stop smoking.” If he does nix the measure, Democrats alone have the votes to override it. In Delaware, a 3/5 majority is required to override a governor's veto.



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MSD APPROVES FINAL BUDGET

BY TERRY ROGERS

On Monday, January 24, Milford School District approved the final Fiscal Year 2022 Revenue and Expenditure Budget. The budget, presented by Dr. Sara Croce, chief financial officer, reflected a continuation of the district's financial priorities.

"This includes providing direct supports for our teachers and students in our classrooms," Croce said. "As well as competitive local salary structures for our staff, ensuring tax rate stability for our community and providing technology and security updates throughout our district. Throughout the pandemic, the district has been able to minimize spending and use our federal funds received on ongoing technology replacements, the purchase of personal protective equipment and sanitation supplies to best maintain our school environments."

Croce explained that over the next few months, the district will begin working on large-scale projects using federal money to improve air quality and provide additional space for students. She also stated that the final budget reflected funding related to the Sept. 30 unit count which showed another increase in student population.

"Any increase in students provides the district with additional state allocations in Division I salaries, Division II energy and all other costs, and Division III equalization funding," Croce said. "Other major increases on the revenue side are attributable to the ongoing support

of opportunity funding providing programs and staff to support our English learners and low-income students. We've been strategic with our plan for these funds to support increased personnel as well as targeted academic programming during and after the school day. Though some of our local revenues have increased due to the recent housing growth throughout the district, some appropriations you will notice like the school fund interest, which is managed by the State Treasurer's Office, remains at a rate ongoing at zero percent."

The main cost drivers this year, according to Croce, were increased allocations from the state for specific programs on the operating side. There were increases in costs required for legal advertising, including those for the recent referendum. State allocation for students in specialized placements were allocated by the Department of Education and reflect the district's costs for those services. Croce also explained that transportation allocations were adjusted to reflect funds received and will be amended as needed.

"I am proud to present, once again, a balanced budget for this year, representing our district's fiscal priorities and continuing to set aside funds for the future of our district," Croce said. The board approved the \$64.1 million budget unanimously.



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DEFUNCT LITERACY COUNCIL MONEY GOES TO KENT, SUSSEX PROGRAMS

BY BETSY PRICE

Money allotted to a defunct literacy council has been going to family literacy programs at three Delaware high schools, via the Delaware Department of Education.

The issue of where \$278,000 listed in state budgets was going came up in Feb. 1's meeting of the Joint Legislative Oversight and Sunset Committee. The committee's staff said that the cash continued to be allotted to the Interagency Council on Adult Literacy, which hasn't met since June 2015.

The committee asked the staff to pursue what was happening to the money designated for the council, also known as ICAL. The Sunset Committee reviews state board, councils and commissions to make sure they are needed. If they are, the committee considers how to improve or support them.

"The purpose of the ICAL monies was to fund the two family literacy programs in the state—Polytech Family

Literacy and Sussex Tech Family Literacy," said Alison May, spokeswoman for the Delaware Department of Education. "Each year these programs have used this money to support these family literacy services."

The Polytech and Sussex Tech programs are valuable resources for English Language Learner families in Kent and Sussex counties she said. The results are documented in the Adult Education Annual Reports, which she provided.

The reports say ICAL and some federal funding is being used for programs that are designed to improve literacy levels of young children by providing instruction to parents. The programs combine adult basic education, parenting education, early childhood development activities for children and interactive literacy programs.

Classes are taught in schools, libraries and public housing authorities.

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In 2017, 2018 and 2019, the reports say, Polytech High School and Sussex Tech High School used the literacy money.

In 2020, Polytech, Sussex Tech and Christina High School are listed under the literacy funding, with Polytech and Sussex Tech receiving the ICAL money and Christina receiving federal Dual Generation funding.

In 2021, three family literacy programs are listed. Again, Polytech and Sussex Tech received ICAL money and Christina got federal funding.

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TAX WAIVER PROCESS DISCUSSED AT BOARD MEETING

BY TERRY ROGERS

At their regular monthly meeting, Milford School District Board of Education discussed the process for residents to request waivers of Sussex County tax penalties. Dr. Sara Croce explained that she had been in discussions with Katrina Mears with Sussex County regarding the methods used by other districts.

“She did inform me that there are two other districts that do provide waivers,” Croce said. “One gives the county full authority if the bill is more than five years old to waive tax penalties. The other less than five years old, but it has to be taken to that district school board. The other district does take them to the school board but has a pattern of waivers. That is the only two in Sussex that have anything in place at this time.”

Croce stated that one of the districts talked at length about waiving penalties if the tax was for a primary residence and they were willing to pay the tax bill in full, something that Mears supported. However, the final decision was at each school board’s discretion how waiving penalties would be handled going forward. She stated that if the Milford board wanted to set a precedence with each county, a letter would be drafted to let them know what authority each county would be granted on the district’s behalf. President Jason Miller asked Croce to explain how the process worked currently.

“So, typically, what would happen is that an individual would somehow learn that they have delinquent property taxes through Sussex County,” Croce said. “The county

would direct them to the school district because we are a larger portion of county taxes. And we have the ability to waive the interest on those. So if that individual would like to request to the school board to have that interest waived, they may write a letter detailing their circumstances and why they are requesting the waiver that has been brought from me to the board for discussion and vote. If the board votes that the person is to have taxes or the tax penalties waived, I would then let Sussex County know that and they would take care of collection on the remaining funds for the taxes. So, each and every time I get one, regardless of the amount or how many years it has been delinquent, we bring it before the board.”

Miller stated that in the four years he had been on the board, the number of requests for waivers seemed to increase. He felt it was beneficial for the board to discuss the process in order to avoid arbitrary decisions and to be sure there was a set process. This was not an agenda item but solely a discussion item designed to allow board members to express their views on the subject.

“There are very large amounts of outstanding taxes and when I am done with this statement, I am sure Sara can quote us what is due,” Dr. Adam Brownstein said. “The thought process was that if we can collect some of the principle in full, collecting the principle in full is better than collecting none of the principle. So, for the taxpayers in Milford School District, it would be a net gain for them because we would be able to recoup some of that money that is presently missing in our coffers. The idea here is to encourage people to pay the taxes that they owe, and we don’t want there to be barriers to us trying to recoup as much of that as possible.”

The majority of the requests were coming from Sussex County, Croce explained. She stated that Sussex County does not put a sheriff’s sale on a primary residence while Kent County does. That was one of the reasons the district was receiving more requests. Croce stated that Milford School District currently had almost \$1 million in back taxes owed.

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MISPILLION AND ROSS TO GET PLAYGROUND UPGRADES

BY TERRY ROGERS

Milford School District approved two plans that would add additional playgrounds to both Mispillion and Lulu Ross Elementary schools. The playgrounds would provide additional equipment and allow students to spread out during recess.

“The main points here are that these projects give Mispillion two playgrounds like every other elementary school in our district,” Mike Sharp, supervisor of Buildings and Grounds, said. “It also allows children to spread out at recess. The timeframe would be the summer, but it could be pushed back due to constraints, playground equipment and other factors. The cost is \$306,375.01 which went up a little bit due to prevailing wages.”

In addition to the new playground, there would be a change in the ground covering which would require less maintenance than what currently exists on the ground. Sharp explained that the ground cover was a rubber material and is similar to what is used at the playground behind the Boys and Girls Club.

The Lulu Ross playground would not be completed until next year, Sharp stated, and would cost \$220,189.61. Funding for both projects would come from federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding.

Vice-President Rony Baltazar-Lopez asked if, in the future, these types of requests could be presented with more detail in more of a memo form. President Jason Miller questioned what vendor would be doing the ground cover as only the playground equipment was shown in the information presented to the board.

“We broke out the surfacing separately,” Sharp said. “We are using a state contract for the equipment. There was only one company on state contract for the ground covering and they weren’t really willing to work with us to do the project. They wanted all or nothing. So, it was one of those things where if they come in and the grid’s not level, the surfacing doesn’t work. So we went with this one, they used to be on contract and they went away from it as they say they can give us a better price this way.”

Miller stated that he just wanted to be sure the district was following proper procedure and protocols. Board member Scott Fitzgerald asked if there was a local share required for ESSER funding. Because the two playgrounds assist with social distancing, the projects qualify for the funding with no need for a match from the district. The new playground projects were approved unanimously.



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PHOTO BY KEVIN EICKMAN

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WIN-LESS, NOT HEARTLESS

BY KEVIN EICKMAN

This season has not exactly gone the way the Milford girls' basketball team would have hoped. Tuesday night, the Buccaneers hosted Polytech and once again came out on the wrong end of a lopsided 62-14 score. For most athletes, if you play sports long enough you almost inevitably have a season like the one Milford is going through right now. It's not that a team is bad that matters, it is how the players on that team handle the adversity that counts. With regards to this year's Buccaneers, they have embraced it as a learning experience and a chance to improve. During the loss to Polytech, one thing was obvious, Milford would not pack it in. "You can really see it out there, these girls are learning every game and every practice. The word 'quit' is not in their vocabulary," Coach Kevin Barkley said.

Barkley was correct, from the opening tip, until the final buzzer sounded every player on the team gave it their all. When they made a mistake, they picked each other up and talked about how to correct it next time. When the other team scored a basket, you could see that Milford players were not pleased with their effort and talked about how to correct it. There was one thing you never saw however, that was anyone hanging their head. "I have coached a lot of teams and the heart that these girls show is incredible, you can't teach that. We have an eighth-grader, some freshmen and sophomores are getting a great deal of experience, this will pay off down the road," Barkley said.

Marshay Brown (eighth grade), freshman Carlee Davis and sophomore A'Zaiyah Fullman are among those who have shown improvement this year. While Milford currently sits at 0-16, that has not kept them from being optimistic. "You can see it, this is a core group coming together and I believe the future is bright for this group. Time will tell, but I am looking forward to watching them to continue to improve," Barkley said.

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BUCS SEED FIFTH IN STATE DUALS

BY KEVIN EICKMAN

Back on Jan. 14, Milford wrestling traveled up to perennial wrestling power Smyrna. The result was a nerve-racking meet, which found the Buccaneers on the wrong end of a 36-35 score. During the hotly contested event, both Milford's strengths and weaknesses were on display. That loss by Milford, coupled with a strong end-of-season surge by Salesianum, landed Milford as the fifth-seeded team for the upcoming State Dual Meet Tournament.

As a result of getting knocked out of the top four, Milford has to travel tonight (Wednesday) to face off against Smyrna again. While it is not exactly what Milford would have wanted, it is a challenge that it will embrace. "When you travel up to Smyrna, you're not just facing off against a quality program, you have a very enthusiastic home crowd. Smyrna is used to winning state titles and they always bring their 'A' game," Coach Don Parsley said.

When asked what needs to happen for the results to change from the previous meet, Parsley was straightforward. "When you lose, the other team was better. While we were close, we still lost. We have to find a way to make up those points so we can get the win," Parsley said.

If Milford wins tonight, it will advance to the final four, which takes place Saturday starting at 2 p.m. at Smyrna.

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