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Women's arm wrestling league will throw down for charity | B1

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Flag football fever reaches mainstream, Olympic Games

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REGION

Keeping eagles aloft



STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ

An American bald eagle escapes the sun perched high in a pine tree in Greenfield. The bald eagle is just one of the hundreds of species that have been saved from extinction under the Endangered Species Act, which celebrated its 50th anniversary on Wednesday.

Marking 50 years of Endangered Species Act successes in Valley and beyond

By MADDIE FABIAN Staff Writer

Ask almost any conservationist about an Endangered Species Act (ESA) success story and they will tell you about the bald eagle.

"Growing up, I would have never seen a bald eagle in western Massachusetts," said Jeff Collins, senior director of conservation science at Mass Audubon. The national bird was nearly driven extinct in the lower 48 states, in large part because of the infamous insecticide DDT, formerly widely used in agriculture.

Listed as an endangered species under the ESA in 1978, the bald eagle began to bounce back after DDT was banned and the birds and their habitats were protected. It has since been



AP

The New England cottontail rabbit is protected on the Endangered Species List in Massachusetts.

delisted from the ESA and is no longer considered endangered or threatened. "Now they're quite common on the

Quabbin Reservoir; and they can be seen along the Connecticut River," Collins said.

The bald eagle is just one of the hundreds of species that have been saved from extinction under the Endangered Species Act, which celebrated its 50th anniversary on Wednesday.

Over the past 50 years, the ESA has been credited with saving 99% of listed animal and plant species from extinction through collaboration among federal agencies; state, local and tribal governments; and conservation organizations and individuals.

"It was really groundbreaking legislation when it was passed in 1973, and it really kind of created a model and a roadmap for similar legislation across the

SEE ENDANGERED A9

MASSACHUSETTS

Educators float MCAS alternatives

Voters in 2024 may decide whether to keep controversial test as graduation requirement

By EDEN MOR For the Gazette

Opponents of using the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test as a high school graduation requirement suggest there are better ways to measure student achievement should voters get an opportunity to remove the requirement in November 2024.

In September, Massachusetts Attorney General Andrea Campbell ruled the proposed 2024 ballot question to remove the MCAS graduation requirement for high school students was legally sound.

The question, strongly supported by the Massachusetts Teachers Association, would only remove the requirement, which has been in place since 2003. Students would still have to take the exam. Lawmakers could approve the change, or backers of the initiative would need to collect additional signatures to place it on the ballot.

Test supporters, particularly in the business community, stress that the exam, while in need of revisions, is the primary means for providing students, families, educators and policymakers with objective, valid, reliable, comparable information essential to determining gaps in educational outcomes. It also helps determine preparedness for college and career success, and identifies where additional resources are most needed — especially for those who have been and continue to be systemically marginalized: students of color, those with disabilities, English learners, and students from low-income families, supporters argue.

The Massachusetts Department of Education, which oversees the testing, says "MCAS has been upgraded to better measure the critical skills students need for success in the 21st century: deeper understanding; knowledge application; synthesizing; and writing. Most students will take the test on a computer reflecting the digital world we live in today. MCAS helps the commonwealth identify schools and districts that need additional support."

MCAS criticism

But many scholars criticize the test as a whole, arguing that it provides students with no educational value and should be eliminated altogether. They recommend assessments that test how students apply what they learn in the classroom.

Lifelong educators like Harry Feder, executive direc-

SEE MCAS A7

DEERFIELD

Tree House Brewing gets OK for 5K capacity

Expansion from 1,500 for outdoor concerts, events hinges on safety plan

By CHRIS LARABEE Staff Writer

SOUTH DEERFIELD — Tree House Brewing Company has been given the go-ahead to more than triple its occupancy for the coming season, pending public safety officials' approval of a emergency

action plan.

The Select Board gave the conditional approval Wednesday night, which hinges on signatures from the town health agent and building inspector, as well as the police, fire and EMS chiefs. Once approved, the popular brewery will be allowed to host up to 5,000 pa-

trons — up from 1,500 — for outdoor concerts and other special events, such as its annual half-marathon. The parking lot will remain its original size and the company will again work with neighbors, like Yankee Candle, for satellite lots and shuttle/bus routes.

While the board said they appreciate the company's responsiveness to the town's request, members said the brewery needs to come up with a finalized emergency action plan that shows how Tree House would get 5,000 people indoors or off-site in the event of an emergency.

"Public safety is not negotiable and it never has been," said Select Board Chair Car-

olyn Shores Ness. "I do feel comfortable that there is a cooperative working relationship and that you can get this done."

Safety requests have been laid out in a memorandum signed by Police Chief John Paciorek Jr., South Deerfield Fire District Chief William Swasey, Acting South County EMS Chief Tim Drumgool, Health Agent Valerie Bird and

Building Commissioner Robert Walden.

While the top request listed by each department is an updated emergency action plan — and asking that it be a "living document" — the Police Department is also requesting the company look into getting a second driveway on Routes 5 and 10 to alleviate traffic at the

SEE TREE HOUSE A7

NORTHAMPTON

Fund honors a shining light

Cafe launches charity to mark longtime volunteer Katie Lyons' focus on foster children

By JAMES PENTLAND Staff Writer

NORTHAMPTON — Katie Lyons was well-known among her wide circle of friends and family for her dedication to children in foster care. So it was only natural that a fund

set up in her memory would aim to benefit those children.

Katie's Fund was established by Joe's Cafe owner Meaghan Sullivan in honor of Lyons, who worked at the Market Street restaurant for about 12 years, until 2019. Lyons died unexpectedly in January at the age of 44.

Sullivan said she had been trying to think of a way to honor her friend, a woman who lit up every room she

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COURTESY MEAGHAN SULLIVAN

Joe's Cafe staff, with Katie Lyons at right, gather for a photo after the restaurant's annual Derby party in this undated photo.

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WEATHER TODAY

Misty, then rain, high 45.

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Drawing by Sebastien Alhassan from R.K. Finn Ryan Road School in Florence.

MCAS alternatives

MCAS FROM A1

tor of Fair Test, which supports the implementation of “multiple, nonbiased measures of student achievement,” said MCAS tests memorization skills and knowledge of formulas rather than critical thinking and real-world skills. Teachers often have to stray from their curriculum when preparing students to take the MCAS.

“There’s a lot of complaints about ... the issue of the narrowing of curriculum. What does MCAS actually test?” Feder asked.

Feder also cited the widely researched “disproportionate discriminatory impact” MCAS has on students of color and low-income students, who do more poorly on the test overall.

Jack Schneider, author of “Beyond the Test Scores: A Better Way to Measure School Quality” and professor of education at University of Massachusetts Amherst, said another major issue with MCAS is that it takes away from physical time in the classroom and contributes to chronic absenteeism.

“We know right now that standardized testing is really disruptive. There are ways of minimizing that disruption,” Schneider said. “For instance, we don’t need to test every single student in grades three through eight as well as 10th grade every single year in order to get basically the same information.”

Beyond that, MCAS has a history of controversial questions. In 2019, students and teachers advocated for the removal of a question that asked students to “write from the perspective of an ‘openly racist’ character in the novel ‘The Underground Railroad,’” according to WBUR.

At the time, MTA President Merrie Najmy said all tests taken that included the racist question should be nullified because it was likely that the offensive nature of the question affected students’ test results.

MCAS inspired by ‘bad data’

Mary Battenfeld, clinical professor of American Studies at Boston University with a focus on contemporary education policy and parent advocacy, said many of the problems with MCAS can be traced to the Education Reform Act.

The 1993 bill aimed to improve “accountability” on behalf of schools, a response to widespread panic at the release of a report titled “A Nation at Risk,” which suggested that education in the country was suffering because SAT scores were decreasing.

Battenfeld said that “A Nation at Risk” was “based on bad data.”

As schools across the state continued to desegregate in the 1960s and more money was funneled into education under former President Lyndon B. Johnson, a more diverse pool of students were taking the SAT.

“The data was saying, [SAT scores are] dropping, but they actually were rising if you took into account incremental rises over time,” she said.

Battenfeld said that the same flawed methods of evaluating test scores are being used today.

For example, when MCAS was administered for the first time following the COVID-19 pandemic, WBUR reported that the 2022 scores were “less than reassuring,” indicating a “slow and mixed recovery.”

However, Battenfeld said these statistics made sense from a holistic perspective, considering pandemic-incited learning loss.

“If you’re only looking at the end line of what the score is ... you’re not looking at improvement,” she said.

Alternative ranking

While some MCAS supporters argue that it is a crucial tool to rank schools in the state and has helped Massachusetts reach its high national ranking in education, Schneider said this is not the case.

U.S. News and World Report uses six indicators when ranking high schools — col-

lege readiness, college curriculum breadth, state assessment proficiency, state assessment performance, underserved student performance and graduation rate — though not all indicators are equally valued. Schools are then given a cumulative score between one and 100, and ranked accordingly.

“Everybody knows at this point, that if you just are looking at proficiency rates on standardized tests, you’re not learning about school quality,” Schneider said. “[What] you’re learning about is the affluence of the community.”

Though some MCAS supporters argue that the test is necessary to rank Massachusetts education on a national level, Schneider said the Nation’s Report Card, an annual report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, already does that.

NAEP uses matrix testing, in which they randomly sample students from a variety of grades and schools to measure a state’s progress, a method that significantly reduces classroom disruption, Schneider said.

Citizens for Public Schools reports that the idea that accountability through MCAS is what previously allowed the state to rise in national ranking is false.

“Massachusetts was long at or near the top on the long-standing national test known as NAEP, before the MCAS and state standards came along,” they wrote. “This was mostly because we have a relatively affluent and educated state, two things that are closely linked to test results.”

Classroom embedded assessments

According to Schneider, who leads sister organizations Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment and the Education Commonwealth project, alternative methods of testing are already in the works. Together, these organizations have built guidelines to what they call “classroom embedded assessments,” which test students’ ability to apply what they learn in the classroom.

Schneider hopes that through assigned application projects, evaluated by teachers, students will be able to feel the value of their work.

A crucial goal of classroom embedded assessment, according to Schneider, is its ability to provide teachers with valuable feedback on what works and what doesn’t work in the classroom.

“Sometimes, people will make the case that what we learn from standardized assessments helps school leaders and educators adjust their practice. And that just simply isn’t true,” he said. “The information just isn’t timely enough, and isn’t granular enough to really be valuable for the purpose of informing instruction.”

MCIEA and the Education Commonwealth Project have created free, widely available tools for educators to use when incorporating classroom embedded assignments. Teachers are encouraged to measure the efficacy of assigned projects through six different standards: alignment, rigor, equity, authenticity, agency and accessibility.

Feder said that he has already seen some school districts in the commonwealth adopt innovative testing methods.

“I think there are at least eight districts around the state that do [performance-based assessments] at all levels of schools, so not just high school. And those are both sort of summative assessments, and formative assessments,” he said. “So there is a lot of work that’s being done on this front.”

Schneider said that adopting innovative testing methods throughout the state is “well within the realm of possibility.”

“I think we have demonstrated that it is possible to do this now if you want to do it,” he said. “You would need the state to take this seriously and to use the resources that the state has at its disposal.”

Eden Mor writes for the Gazette from the Boston University Statehouse Program.

Katie’s Fund honors supporter of foster kids

FOSTER FROM A1

entered, but was also kind, generous and compassionate.

“It struck me, every time I’d speak with her around this time of year, she was shopping for gifts for children in foster care,” Sullivan said. “She loved the holidays.”

So Sullivan came up with the idea of Katie’s Fund, which would be administered through the nonprofit Friends of Children Inc. Following a fundraising dinner Dec. 13 at Joe’s, the fund launched with more than \$7,500 in donations.

The restaurant contributed 25% of the night’s proceeds, and others dropped off checks or gave online, Sullivan said as she took a short break from writing thank-you notes to donors Tuesday.

“It seemed to happen naturally,” she said of the way the fundraiser came together. “Katie was such a part of the community, I knew a lot of people would want to come out.”

Lyons was connected to Friends of Children through her stepmother, Jane Lyons, who retired as executive director of the organization in June.

Friends of Children was formed as a nonprofit child advocacy organization in Northampton in 1990. Among other initiatives, it trains court-appointed special advocates (CASA), who advocate for children during legal proceedings in divorce or abuse cases, and runs a program called FOCUS that recruits mentors to help young adults who have “aged out” of foster care make the transition to



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Meaghan Sullivan talks to Pat Joyce at Joe’s Cafe in Northampton in February 2019. Sullivan, the cafe’s owner, has started Katie’s Fund in honor of one-time employee Katie Lyons to support foster children. Lyons died earlier this year at the age of 44.

adulthood.

Sullivan said she still gets emotional thinking about Lyons. “I think about her every day,” she said. “Doing this fundraiser, she’s very present, especially the last couple of weeks.”

In a press release from Friends of Children, she expressed how Lyons seemed to have a sixth sense for people who could use emotional support.



KATIE LYONS

“Katie had a way of being there when you were most in need — whether it be a shoulder to cry on, some reassurance, or just a good old-fashioned laugh,” Sullivan wrote.

The Lyons family expressed thanks to Joe’s Cafe in a recent letter to the editor:

“No one knew better than Katie how important community and family are. For years, she worked happily raising

money and buying holiday gifts for children and youth in care, giving children and the community who donated a measure of belonging to something larger than themselves.”

Friends of Children spokeswoman Valerie Smart said Katie’s Fund will go toward buying essentials for children as well as holiday gifts, and providing opportunities to participate in sports and the arts.

“It’s a program that we’ll continue to seek funding for,” Smart said.

Tree House Brewing gets OK for 5K capacity

TREE HOUSE FROM A1

end of a large event. That sort of request also brings the Department of Transportation into the fold, as any sort of change to Routes 5 and 10 requires the agency’s approval.

If the company does not receive approval for the curb cut from the state, it is expected to articulate in its plan on how it would handle so many people leaving the venue without crippling traffic.

Tree House Brewing Regulatory Specialist Allison Masley and Chief Growth Officer Sarah Maggie Morin said in their presentation to the board that the company is seeking to expand its capacity to draw in different musical acts and larger crowds, which could then bolster the economic impact the business already brings to town.

“While we are looking to expand the number of people,” Morin added, “it doesn’t mean we’re expanding in terms of the decibels or getting louder.”

While there have been few, if any, official noise complaints made to the town, the Select Board did note there were several comments posted on social media, along with a couple residents that aired concerns Wednesday evening.

“I love Tree House, I love your pizza and your venue, but there were a couple of your shows that I had to go inside for,” said Jackson Road resident Tami Gaylor. “We feel like the venue is perfect, tripling the number of people just seems mind-boggling to me.”

Masley said they are going to have sound engineers study the brewery’s noise levels again, but she said concert decibels “never exceeded” the 90 decibel limit at the property line.

“While it may be 85 (decibels) at our property, the wind takes the sound of the train quite far ... sound can travel in mysterious ways and I’m sure that’s why it’s louder near your house,” Masley said. “I have made sure we are not exceeding any sort of sound level that would not be acceptable to our neighbors. We do want to be good neighbors.”

Shores Ness said the company has worked well with the town and is responsive to its concerns, so she has no worries about noise levels or the large crowds, as long as Tree House can show it has strong emergency and event plans.

“I have heard of no compliance issues and they are very strict,” Shores Ness said. “There have been no viola-

tions whatsoever, it is family-friendly in what they are trying to do and I’d say they have an outstanding record.”

Swasey added that the brewery is a good partner with the South Deerfield Fire Dis-

trict.

“They’ve taken any of our questions, comments and concerns and they’ve really worked with us,” Swasey said. “Do I have some concerns? ... Yes, but they are going to be

addressed in the emergency action plan. This document, the (emergency action plan) is very important to us.”

Chris Larabee can be reached at clarabee@recorder.com or 413-930-4081.

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