

Ex-councilman says Cape May needs parking garage

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — Former councilman Chris Bezaire brought up a controversial topic to City Council, constructing a garage to remedy the city's lack of parking spaces.

At an Aug. 20 meeting, he said two seats on council are up for reelection, noting council discussed a number of capital projects such as the firehouse, the desalination plant, Lafayette Street Park, a police station and expansion of the seawall.

"They all have in common the fact that none of those projects pay for themselves," he said.

A parking garage would be a capital improvement project that would contribute to paying for itself, he said. Bezaire said building a garage has been a recommendation of the city's master plan for at least 45 years.

This summer's traffic congestion and the number of drivers seeking spaces has made it clear that Cape May needs a solution, he said.

"In the 2023 budget, we (the city) brought in almost \$2.4 million in parking meter revenue," Bezaire

said.

Council projected \$2 million in parking revenue for this year, he said.

City Manager Paul Dietrich said the city opened the grassy area of the Lafayette Street Park site for parking this summer and motorists were parking on the St. John Street side, but it averaged about 10 cars at any given time.

"We have a parking problem in certain locations in town. We have to change the attitude of some of our visitors and residents — you can find free parking, you might have to walk a little bit to get there but there are opportunities," he said.

When completed, Lafayette Street Park will have a paved parking lot, Dietrich said.

Bezaire said drivers may not want to park on a grass lot on Lafayette Street but may be willing to pay \$20 to park in the center of town. He said two locations have previously been discussed for a parking garage, the city owned lot next to Collier's Liquors and the Bank Street lot.

Construction costs for a 150,000-square-foot garage, which

could hold between 375 and 500 parking spaces, would average between \$8 million and \$10 million, Bezaire said.

He said a bond for the project would cost the city between \$350,000 and \$550,000 per year depending on the interest rate and term of the bond.

"So, you compare \$350,000 to \$550,000 payment per year on a bond in a city that brings in \$2.4 million in parking meter revenue," he said. "I don't know how much revenue 375 to 500 spots would bring, but obviously the city wouldn't be on the hook for the entire \$350,000 to \$550,000 every year because you would easily be able to earmark that money for a parking garage."

Bezaire said the affluent visitors to Cape May "don't care what they pay, they want the amenity, and it does go into a quality-of-life issue." He said it is difficult for pedestrians to cross the street in gridlocked traffic.

Councilwoman Maureen McDade said to think that another 550 cars would be circulating around Lafayette Street and around the Washington Street Mall gave her pause.

"There's been ideas floated around just briefly closing down the entire streets around the mall and making it completely pedestrian, certainly during the season," she said.

Bollards could be installed on street ends similar to European cities, allowing streets to open and close at certain times, McDade said. She said the city needs to discourage drivers from believing they need to park as close as possible to their destination.

Charging more for convenient parking would not change the behavior of drivers, McDade said. She noted the jitney service will run until the end of the year on weekends.

It would be wonderful if more people used the jitney, allowing the service to operate during the day, McDade said. She noted there was parking available near Poverty Beach and a shuttle could pick up passengers at that location.

"Putting up a structure that says 'everybody land yourself in the center of town,' I still believe that may not be the best solution for traffic flow, pedestrian issues," McDade said.

Bezaire said ridership numbers for the jitney have been fractionally improving.

Councilman Mike Yeager asked if 375 spaces in a parking garage would be sufficient.

"There could be a lot more demand here than we realize and actually parking is somewhat of a meter on who's going to come and who is not," he said.

During public comment, Municipal Taxation and Revenue Advisory Committee Chairman Dennis Crowley said the committee made recommendations on how to fund parking solutions.

"In those recommendations were revenue sources which are not being used right now and should be used, specifically user fees for the individuals who come into town and need a place to stick their cars," he said.

Crowley said Cape May is a business, the reality of growth and vitality of commercialism in this town can't be understated.

"It is not the Cape May that we all went to as kids," he said.

The master plan has fallen far short of recognizing that reality, Crowley said.

Stockton students work aboard NOAA research vessel

GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — Lora Panepinto has always been comfortable on the water. The Stockton University sophomore spends her summers teaching children boat safety at the Liberty Nautical Education Center on the Rahway River.

"I'm pretty used to nasty weather and being on a boat," the Staten Island, N.Y., native said.

But nothing prepared her for spending a week 140 miles offshore, studying the ocean floor 1,500 feet deep on a research vessel.

"I don't even think there's enough words to explain it," said the double major in marine and environmental science. "It changes your view of what being on the water can look like. When you are out in the open water and you don't see land, it kind of opens up your world a bit."

Panepinto was one of six Stockton students who took part in a first-time series of cruises with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in July. The students lived and worked with a crew as

it mapped the ocean floor off South Carolina. Alanna Weeks, Mackenzie Briggs and Seth Sims sailed from July 5-12, and Dustin Horsensky, Hannah Elliott and Panepinto traveled from July 15-21.

"It is rare that undergraduate and graduate students get an opportunity to sail aboard a NOAA vessel," said Julia Wallace, a physical scientist with NOAA's Office of Coast Survey. "These cruises enable groups of students from several academic institutions to experience

hydrographic mapping operations, life at sea aboard a NOAA vessel, and network with other marine science students."

Stockton was one of only six schools invited by NOAA to send students.

"Stockton is one of a handful of schools in the country that offer undergraduate training in the field of hydrography and marine technology," said Steve Evert, the director of Stockton's Marine Field Station in Port Republic.

Hydrography is the sci-

ence of measuring and describing the physical features of bodies of water and their adjacent lands. The NOAA cruises used multibeam sonar to scan and map the ocean floor as part of a project called Seabed 2030 that aims to map the entire ocean floor by 2030. During each of the cruises, the vessel used a powerful multibeam sonar to scan and map the sea floor by creating a grid with dozens of lanes, often 40 miles long, to build a bathymetric three-dimensional image of

the sea floor.

"It's like cutting your grass on the ocean floor but never stopping," said Stockton adjunct professor Steve Nagiewicz, who joined the students on the second tour. "We know more about the surface of the moon and Mars than what the bottom of the ocean looks like. Mapping the sea floor allows us to better understand how our own planet works, how the ocean affects atmospheric currents and how it affects the distribution of life in the ocean."

AirFest 2024 lands Aug. 29 at airport

ERMA — Naval Air Station Wildwood (NASW) Aviation Museum's AirFest 2024 is set to return Aug. 29 through Sept. 1.

The museum, which is located inside a 92,000-square-foot World War II-era wooden hangar, invites families, aviation enthusiasts and history buffs to the event filled with captivating displays, historical aircraft, exciting flyovers and fly-ins, live entertainment, food trucks, vendors and exhibitors.

The event, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, promises a lineup of aircraft and events that will engage and entertain visitors of all ages.

Aircraft highlighted this year include a Supermarine Spitfire MK IXE, P-51D Mustang Double Trouble Two and the Berlin Airlift Historical Foundation's C-54 Spirit of Freedom.

As part of the festivities, there will be a spectacular flyover by the 177th Fighter Wing of the New Jersey Air National Guard involving four F-16s on Aug. 30, as well as a thrilling fly-in of historic aircraft by the Aero Club of Pennsylvania and local chapters of the Experimental Aircraft Association on Aug. 31.

Attendees will also have the opportunity to witness helicopters and meet



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The SNJ Advanced Trainer will be among the vintage aircraft on display during AirFest 2024, scheduled for Aug. 28-Sept. 1 at the Naval Air Station Wildwood Aviation Museum.

pilots and crew from the U.S. Coast Guard and other organizations such as the New Jersey State Police, AtlantiCare MedEvac and Cape May County Mosquito Commission.

The event also includes live musical entertainment, free face painting and caricatures, vendors, an array of food trucks, a beer and wine garden and even axe throwing.

The event will also feature a diverse range of exhibitors such as the 621st Contingency Response

Wing of the U.S. Air Force where visitors can discover their mission and check out their specialized equipment such as a MRZR tactical vehicle and the extensive collection of naval aviation historian and NASW board member Jim Krombach.

Admission is \$18 for adults and \$14 for children age 3-12. Members, children under 3 and active-duty military personnel are admitted for free.

Visit usnasw.org.airfest for more information.

Another View

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government official, state or federal, can do to stop you from yanking it up and bulldozing it.

Even in the Pine-lands, the plants aren't necessarily afforded meaningful protections, Juelg said. Although the Pinelands Commission keeps a list of threatened and endangered plants and strives to protect them (swamp pink is on this list, too), it lacks effective enforcement powers. And efforts to change that have been slow going.

Juelg and Emile DeVito, Ph.D., New Jersey Conservation Foundation's staff biologist, have been working together for two decades to draft a statute to protect threatened and endangered plants in New Jersey.

"But every time it's been introduced to state Legislature" — about five times, Juelg said — "it never gets out of committee." An attitude of futility is often the problem. "The current version, Assembly Bill 1817, is a new opportunity for our representatives to protect New Jersey's biodiversity."

"Plant blindness," our cultural tendency to think of plants more as wallpa-

per than living beings, doesn't help the push for added protection.

But there's no doubt that plants and their protection matter. Plants are easily Earth's most dominant life form, making up 80 percent of total biomass. They're the basis for all other forms of life in an ecosystem, the cornerstone of biodiversity.

And they're taken for granted in most modern societies. More than half the species protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act are plants. In 2020, they received less than 4 percent of federal endangered species funding. As Juelg and DeVito have found, they don't have the political clout of animal species that attract attention or get in people's way.

Biologist and New Jersey Conservation Foundation's stewardship team member Martin Rapp considers swamp pink our state's poster child for why plant protections matter, and why we need to ramp them up.

"It's beautiful, it's federally threatened and it has a very important population in the range of the plant in New Jersey," he said.

Our status as a swamp pink stronghold hasn't

moved us as a state as much as it should.

"The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection is helping to raise awareness of the significance of plants, including New Jersey's native and rare flora," said Bob Cartica, administrator of the DEP's Office of Natural Lands Management. "I think it's clear that education will be key to ensuring that future generations better understand the significance that plants play in our daily lives. That's why the DEP recently launched its botanical literacy initiative to help combat 'plant blindness.'"

Implementing stronger protections and conservation measures in New Jersey will mean more tracking of the vulnerable plants and more regulations. But we'll all benefit. The loss of threatened and endangered plants would not only diminish the state's natural beauty but also disrupt the complex ecological systems that form the web of life. We have to take action now to protect these irreplaceable resources.

Visit njconservation.org to learn more about preserving New Jersey's land and natural resources.

City may update fee structures

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — City Council is expected to introduce an ordinance at its next meeting to raise mercantile license and land use fees, which have not been updated in a number of years and have not kept pace with costs.

At an Aug. 20 City Council meeting, City Manager Paul Dietrich said the planning and zoning boards have discussed up-

dating the fees. He said he met with City Clerk Erin Burke and Councilwoman Maureen McDade.

"Some things went up, some things went down. We added a few things, we deleted a few things and we consolidated a few things," he said. "I think we've followed some of the recommendations that MTRAC (Municipal Taxation and Revenue Advisory Committee) put forth."

Dietrich asked council to look at the recommenda-

tions, which would be offered as an ordinance for introduction at the next meeting. He said if council moves on the changes then, the new fees would be adopted in October, which would offer plenty of notice of the fee changes for 2025.

McDade said the proposed changes were based on a five-year Consumer Price Index evaluation.

Dietrich said a copy of the proposed ordinance would be sent to MTRAC.

Lower swears in new police officer

VILLAS — Lower Township Mayor Frank Sippel swore in Patrolman Nicholas Romantino during a Lower Township Council meeting.

Romantino is a resident of Egg Harbor Township and a 2022 graduate of the American Military University with an associate degree in fire science and in 2024 with a bachelor's degree in intelligence studies with a concentration in criminal intelligence.

Romantino completed the basic course for police officer training in 2016 at the Camden County Police Academy. He worked as a police officer for the Camden County Police Department from 2016 to 2020. In May 2023, he began working as a police officer for the Elmer Police Department until recently being hired as an officer by the Lower Township Police Department.

Romantino has worked



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Mayor Frank Sippel, left, swears in Patrolman Nicholas Romantino as his girlfriend, Alexis O'Connell, holds the Bible and his father, Marc Romantino, stands by to pin on his badge.

as an EMT in Egg Harbor Township and Avalon and is also a firefighter in Egg Harbor Township as well as the New Jersey Forest Fire Service.

Romantino's girlfriend

Alexis O'Connell held the Bible during the oath. His father, Marc Romantino, a retired lieutenant from the Egg Harbor Township Police Department, pinned his badge.

Housing crisis

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inexpensive options.

Cape Resorts owns numerous boutique hotels and restaurants in Cape May. To accommodate its seasonal workers, Cape Resorts provides housing at the Alcott Hotel for \$600 per month.

The average rent in Cape May is about \$2,000, which is unaffordable for anyone being paid a minimum wage of \$15.13 per hour.

Housing options such as those offered by Cape Resorts are one way employers accommodate their workers.

Companies such as Cape May Whale Watch and Research Center, the Wetlands Institute and the New Jersey Audubon Society also provide discounted housing to their seasonal employees.

Bob Mullock, owner of the Cape May Point Science Center, rents rooms at the Queen of the Sea to environmental seasonal workers.

Meredith O'Donnell is a summer intern who has been living at The Queen for the past four months.

"Housing isn't always affordable or available in the places I'm looking to work," O'Donnell said.

When she accepted the internship position at the Cape May Whale Watch, her first thought was about housing affordability.

"Having housing options like The Queen has allowed me to live affordably in an affluent area while being only minutes away from my work," she said.

The internship is an unpaid position with opportunities to work some paid hours. These positions, as well as most restaurant jobs, pay minimum wage.

The number of hours someone can work and be paid minimum wage does not lend itself to affording typical rental prices.

Cape May is a hotspot for foreign students who make up a large percentage of seasonal workers. Many students working on J1 visas apply to be sponsored workers in the U.S. Cape May is one option that students can choose.

But finding affordable housing proves to be a problem for these students as well.

They can either choose to get help finding housing or find accommodations on their own. Some landlords provide housing specifically for the foreign workers but that still proves to be expensive.

Some rent houses in West Cape May and North Cape May with other J1 students.

Stacy Starikova from Belarus found the house she's renting on a Facebook group for J1 students. The landlord rents specifically to students working in Cape May County.

"We had a call and negotiated deposit and rent. Everyone I live with is working in Cape May for the summer," Starikova said.

This is a common option for J1 workers. Many rent a house together at a discounted price that is within walking and biking distance to their jobs.

Tourism is on the rise, and the city saw a 1.8 percent increase in 2023 with 11 million people visiting the area. Seasonal employees make it possible for the town to keep up with these vacationers and day-trippers who love Cape May.