



SEE PAGE 10

Newport *this week*

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THURSDAY, February 22, 2024

BORN FREE

WINTER FEST

The events for the 2024 Winter Festival continue through Sunday, Feb. 25. One of the highlights is the return of the Mac-and-Cheese Smackdown, not held since 2020. This much-missed event makes a comeback with 10 restaurants participating at the Newport Marriott on Saturday, from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Other crowd-pleasing festivities include Saturday's Bubblemania (showtime is at 6:30 p.m. for anyone 5- to 85-years-old) and the ice carving demonstration on Sunday at Long Wharf Mall. For more information on these events, see the NTW calendar page 11 or visit newportwinterfestival.com.

Newport City Council Spars Over a Lobbying Contract

By Philip Cozzolino

Awarding the bid to a lobbyist who would advocate for the city's interests at the state level proved to be a controversial vote at a Feb. 14 Newport City Council meeting.

Before the council was a motion to award a \$25,000 contract to Capitol Communications Group of Providence for state government relations and advocacy services. The idea came forth at the end of last year, when the council deliberated its priorities for the current legislative session of the Rhode Island General Assembly. One of those priorities was the hiring of a lobbyist, an idea backed by the city's delegation in the state legislature and a practice of many municipalities in Rhode Island.

But Council Vice Chair Lynn Ceglie said the council did not form consensus on which lobbyist to hire and motioned to continue the vote by two weeks.

"I would like the council to go back to work on it," she said.

The city solicited requests for proposals for the work in January and received three responses. The two lowest bids combined were less expensive than the third and highest bid at \$6,000 per month.

According to Mayor Xay Khamyvoravong, the council engaged the two lowest bidders to form a partnership and complete the work for \$5,000 per month under the Capitol Communications Group banner, the contract before the council for approval.

Each bidder was interviewed by councilors at a Jan. 24 session. City solicitor Christopher Behan said he did not see any issues with the bidding process. Interim city manager Laura Sitrin said the process followed the city's typical RFP policy.

"Once you determine that you like one of the providers, you have the option at that point in time to negotiate terms and conditions, including price," Sitrin said.

As the city seeks more state funding to tackle many infrastructure needs, councilors believe a lobbyist at the State House would be a key fixture in gaining more money from the state by pointing to the city's contribution to the statewide economy, its lack of housing stock and the large number of low-income families.

Councilor Jeanne-Marie Napolitano said all bidder rates were negotiable and the motion to award the contract to two of the firms

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Artistic Signs of Spring

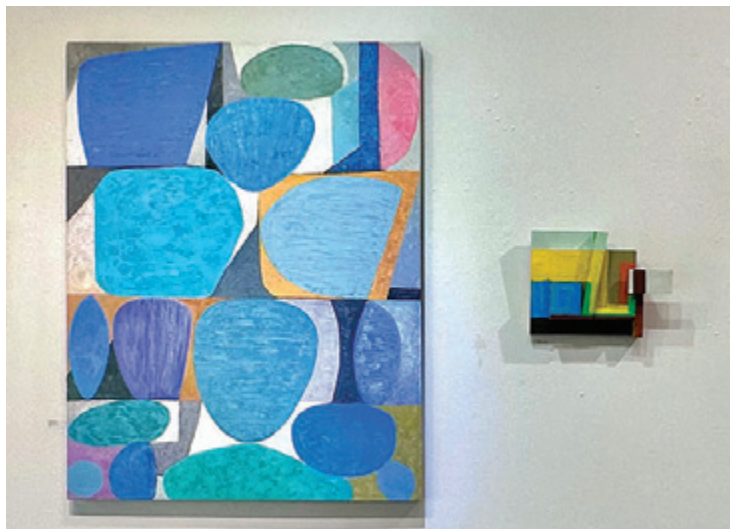
By John Pantalone

The final weeks of winter often seem to drag on for months, but Newport's art galleries are awakening to get us ready for spring.

The Newport Art Museum continues several exhibitions, including two that feature work from its permanent collection. DeBlois Gallery and Spring Bull Gallery have shows that overlap in late February and early March, while some of the newer additions to the city's art scene are also starting their exhibition season over the next few weeks. More information about various sites can be found below.

Jessica Hagen Fine Art provides a group treat with over 30 works by 14 artists represented by the gallery. The show, entitled "Chill Out," is only tangentially about winter. Its real purpose reveals how a group exhibition with disparate artists can create a conversation and speak to viewers at the same time. Made up mostly of paintings both large and small, the show features figure paintings, abstract work, intriguing landscapes and a few pieces that defy labels.

One of the stars of Hagen's stable of artists, Hunt Slonem, confronts you as you walk in the door with some roughly painted oil on wood owls and an intriguing study of a young Abraham Lincoln.



"Chill Out" show at the Jessica Hagen Gallery.

Slonem has scored the paint in the Lincoln portrait to create a screen-like effect, perhaps suggesting that we all have our own perceptions of the great man but cannot truly know him. Even brief study reminds you of how many different faces Lincoln owned, depending on when he was painted or photographed and by whom.

It really is the abstract works that converse in this show. Newport artist Christopher Benson's energetic intersecting shapes resonate in a large painting on one wall facing a small, constructed version on the opposite side of the

room. Next to Benson's larger work hang two smaller shape-driven abstractions by Lloyd Martin. Together, the work reminds us of the seemingly endless combinations of shape and color that creative painters have in their heads as they pursue their own kind of Zen perfection.

For those of us who are suckers for miniature paintings, Vince Natale shows amazing precision in two landscapes no more than five inches wide and a few inches high. They are beautiful and exciting in their detail. Nearby, Tom Sarrantonio focuses on winter scenes

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Beach Commission Doesn't Want to 'Let Easton's Beach Go'

By Philip Cozzolino

As the city of Newport continues to evaluate failing facilities at Easton's Beach, the notion of a permanent retreat from the coastline is being weighed.

The question is simple: If the beach and its facilities continue to sustain damage from intensified weather and storm surge, should the city bother building at the beach at all or should it prioritize only parking and access?

At a Feb. 6 Beach Commission meeting, city officials stressed that many unknowns swirl around beach operations ahead of the 2024 season, and commissioners and the public questioned if the beach would be able to operate at all this year. Despite the dialogue, commissioners made clear they do not want the city to simply "let the beach go."

"I do think, for the first time, there's voices now that say, 'There shouldn't be anything but a parking lot and sand,'" said commissioner Scott Skuncik. "I tend to disagree. I don't think an urban beach should have nothing. We're not in the Outer Banks, we're not going to ride ponies on the beach. We should have some sort of ame-

nities if it's a pedestrian, walkable beach. We've had amenities there for 100 years."

The notion manifested late last month as the City Council considered many pressing infrastructural projects citywide and a hefty \$98.5 million bond package for the November ballot to fund most of the work.

According to city officials, damage resulting from weather and storm surge has bolstered resilience and sustainability needs at public infrastructure across Newport, including an estimated \$23 million to replace the Perrotti and King park seawalls, maintenance at Stone and Elm Street piers and \$12 million at the beach.

An estimated \$10 million is needed for sand replenishment, which would be a recurring effort to combat erosion and preserve Easton's Beach and the nearby Easton Pond, the island's largest supply of public drinking water. About \$2 million is slated for demolition of the carousel and snack bar buildings, as well as the infrastructure connecting them.

An additional \$25 million was proposed by DBVW Architects in 2022 to rebuild permanent fa-

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that evoke abstraction, while offering a clear landscape created by oil on linen. "Winter Fog" captures mist rising from the snow, and "Winter Sunrise" illuminates a leafless forest with a bright hint of hopefulness.

Across the room, Jeremy Houghton's exquisite oil and gold leaf on canvas plays with abstracted bird shapes dancing in a golden sky. The bird theme subtly emerges in the front of the gallery with a series of six small wood sculptures by Jeff Fischer. Each bird has a unique personality, from "Black Bart," with charred white ash and gold leaf on a rosewood stand, to "Puffy," made of western red cedar and decorated roughly with acrylic paint, and "Blue Girl," a brilliantly colored creature made of tupelo resting on a Venetian marble pedestal.

There is much else to enjoy in this show. If you are beleaguered by the cold, snow and ice, visit Jessica Hagen Fine Art. The show will energize you enough to deal with what remains of winter. Hagen has exhibitions lined up through the end of summer, including its annual "Flower Power," and several solo shows.

Noteworthy:

❖ Overlap Gallery opens "Counterpoint," a collaborative exhibition showcasing the works of Rhode Island-based artists Taleen Batalian and Francoise McAree. The show features work in conversation and contrast with one another, including textiles, print-making, paper-making, sculpture and painting. The exhibition will run Feb. 28 to April 13.

The gallery is holding an opening reception on Saturday, March 9, from 4 to 6 p.m. The artists will provide more insight into their process and inspirations during a talk on Thursday, March 28, at 6 p.m. Both events are free and open to the public.



A Lincoln portrait by Hunt Slonem among works at the Jessica Hagen Gallery.



"Warhol" by Ria Hills at Spring Bull Gallery's "Fakes and Forgeries"

❖ DeBlois Gallery recently hosted its annual student art show, featuring work by students at the three local high schools, and will hold its annual "Open Show," beginning March 3. This exhibition opens the gallery to entries submitted by non-members, and often results in an artist being invited to join the cooperative at DeBlois. For a full listing of the shows, visit the gallery website.

❖ Spring Bull Gallery continues its annual "Fakes and Forgeries" show through March 3 and welcomes spring on March 13 with the opening of "Colors of Spring." The current show features various artists' takes on famous paintings or the work of famous and historical artists.

❖ Cusp Gallery has a special exhibition coming that includes historical photos of a "settlement camp" in the Czech ghetto during World War II, along with photos taken at the site by gallery owner Curtis Speer. "Through the Lens of Memory: Theresienstadt Unveiled" has been on exhibit at an art gallery in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. The so-called "settlement camp" of Theresienstadt was a way station for deportation of Jews to concentration camps.

❖ The Newport Art Museum continues its wonderful show of paintings and constructions by Arghavan Khosravi through May 5. It opened an exhibition of Japanese prints from the museum's permanent collection in early February and will keep it on display in the second-floor gallery through next January. Other works from the collection are on exhibit in spaces at the Griswold House main building and the Cushing and Morris building galleries. Artist Fernanda D'Agostino has an installation on the stairwell of Griswold House based on a Portuguese poem that compares the sea to a woman.

❖ Jamestown Arts Center continues its exhibition, "Dropcloths: Tales of a Process," by Deborah Baronas, through March 16. The artist is giving tours of the show Feb. 26-29 and March 9. Its other exhibition, "Centering Clay and the Community," also runs through March 16.

LOBBYIST CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"came out of nowhere."

Councilor Angela McCalla said it was the first time Newport was hiring a lobbyist and she did not mind continuing the motion.

"We've always had our state legislators to be able to champion [our interests]," she said. "Yes, lobbyists can be more aggressive, but I agree with councilor Napolitano. We should all be in agreement on this."

But any hiring delay would significantly impact the timeline of the city's agenda for the legislative session, which concludes in June, according to Khamsyvoravong and councilors Mark Aramli and Charles Holder, who said that if the council needs to form a consensus it could do so at the meeting.

Bills typically have to be submitted no later than March 1 to be seriously considered by the General Assembly, Khamsyvoravong said.

Putting off the vote would taint the bidding process, he added.

"We're in a fight for resources at the state level and we have a lot of competition," Khamsyvoravong said. "So, what we're talking about doing here is stepping back from the clear low bidder and saying to the other party, 'Hey, do you think you can beat these guys' low bid now?' To me, that feels like we're rigging the bid, and I'm not entirely comfortable with the delay, if that is the only reasoning we have."

The lobbyist would be paid out of a council contingency fund and work underneath the council, not the city manager, as is typical of most city employees.

Holder said not voting on the motion would be a "big mistake" and asked about the merits of each bidder. Ceglie said she wished to

discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates "offline."

"I don't think there's councilors comfortable with having a debate about all three applicants," McCalla said. "We also potentially reserve the right to go out to bid again." Khamsyvoravong disagreed.

"It's not just two weeks," he said. "We may feel that it's only two weeks, but we're not functioning in an environment that cares how we feel. We're functioning on a timeline and structure that has deadlines."

Ultimately, Ceglie's motion to continue the vote to the council's next scheduled meeting on Feb. 28 was approved 4-3, with Ceglie, Napolitano, McCalla and councilor David Carlin in favor and Khamsyvoravong, Aramli and Holder opposed.

Notice of Reassessment

Newport property owners will begin receiving a notice of property reassessment in the mail next week as part of the City's ongoing statistical revaluation process. The notice, prepared in concert with the City's consultants Tyler Technology, will include each property's new Assessed Value along with instructions about how to appeal the new valuation. Hearings will be held via phone and should a property owner disagree with the revaluation, a formal appeal may be filed beginning on Aug. 5, 2024 with the City's Tax Assessor's Office.

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