

MOUNTAIN TIMES

FREE

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IT'S WASSAIL WEEKEND

Wassail Weekend in Woodstock is taking place this weekend, featuring a Victoria-themed horse parade.

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FORMER CHILDCARE PROVIDER FOUND GUILTY

A former child care provider in Rutland was found guilty Friday, Dec. 1, of causing a child's death by giving the infant a sedative, which the defendant denied doing when she took the stand.

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JUDGE ORDERS NEW ARREST WARRANT FOR BANYAI

Following an official inspection of Slate Ridge late last week, a judge determined that Daniel Banyai had not brought his property into compliance, reissuing a warrant for his arrest.

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REMEMBERING GWEN ALLARD

The Adaptive Sports Foundation (ASF) is sad to report the passing of the organization's founder, Gwen Allard, who passed away peacefully on Nov. 28 at the age of 86.

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Courtesy Killington Resort

Over 350 skiers from 23 different clubs, academies and universities from around the Northeast came to Killington to train on Superstar the week after World Cup.

Killington provides post-World Cup training opportunity

By Brooke Geery

Following the heart-pounding races of the Stifel Killington Cup, passionate skiers may just be inspired to take up racing themselves. But excelling at the global level of competition is not something that can be achieved overnight. This is why so many academies and clubs exist in the North-

east — to give aspiring athletes the coaching and techniques they need to compete at the highest level.

All the science, technique and dryland training in the world, though, is no match for actual time on snow. And training for a World Cup race does not just require any snow. Athletes

compete on specialized surfaces that require several days and methods of watering, grooming and slipping to prepare. Although it takes weeks to create the course for the Stifel Killington Cup, normally it is only used during the race and then returned to a regular trail surface soon after. This

year, Killington Resort decided to do something different, by continuing to maintain the race-caliber surface and inviting aspiring racers from all over the region to train.

The resort worked closely with nearby Killington Mountain School Suberstar → 6

City option tax raises \$423K in first quarter

Staff report

Rutland City's new local 1% option tax is off to a strong start.

It raised \$423,000 in the quarter ending in October, Treasurer Mary Markowski told the Board of Aldermen Monday, Dec. 4.

The tax, which raises revenue for the city through

an adding 1% to the state's 6% sales tax, went into effect July 1 after voters approved a charter change in March, 1,729 to 1,216.

Most of the money is going to the capital reserve fund to pay for future infrastructure needs, while

Option tax → 3

Pico opens Saturday

Pico Mountain will kick off the 2023/24 winter season at 8:30 a.m. on Saturday, Dec. 9 with a bonus weekend. The resort will operate Saturday and Sunday and then reopen on Friday, Dec. 15 for the regular Thursday-Monday schedule.

"We are excited to welcome back skiers and riders to Pico Mountain early this year!" said Rich McCoy, director of operations at Pico Mountain. "This is actually a week ahead of schedule thanks to the cool November weather and our increased snowmaking capacity, and we are thrilled to offer more terrain than usual."

A newly rebuilt pump house and the addition of 25 new high-efficiency HKD snow guns, Pico Mountain was able to, on average, convert 62% more water into snow than in previous years, according to a resort news release. Pico Mountain also received its first diesel-electric drive groomer, which will enable the grooming of steeper terrain regularly and with 20% fewer

Pico → 6

Governor: 18.5% increase in property taxes is 'unacceptable'

Projected hike is driven largely by a likely unprecedented 12% increase in education spending

By Curt Peterson and Peter D'Auria/VTDigger

The Vermont Dept. of Taxes is projecting a whopping 18.5% increase in residents' property tax rates, a spike that Gov. Phil Scott quickly seized on, calling for lawmakers to address the state's "affordability crisis" as soon as the information was released, Nov. 30.

That eyebrow-raising forecast is

not set in stone. Lawmakers generally set property tax rates in the spring, and as more information about school budgets and tax revenue emerges over the coming months, those

"This letter should sound a major alarm," Bolio wrote.

Thursday letter by Tax Commissioner Craig Bolio, are still likely to unnerve taxpayers.

projections are likely to change at least slightly.

But the new figures, released in the

"For Vermonters and policymakers concerned about property taxes, housing affordability, or overall tax burden, this letter should sound a major alarm," Bolio wrote.

Bolio told the Mountain Times there is actually a gang of elements Tax hike → 12

20th Anniversary Gift-of-Life Marathon Blood Drive

At 21, Richard walked the 14-mile Appalachian around 100-breastfeeding breast clinics and had three blood drives from a viral infection — but was saved in part by blood donors who rolled up their sleeves to help people like him.



Thank you
Thank you
Thank you
Thank you

Thank you
Thank you
Thank you
Thank you

"Your donations can help ensure doctors and hospitals have what they need to best provide the care," said Adams, who works at Green Mountain Power, one of the sponsors of the GOLF. "I realize today because the people I don't have donated blood, something someone in my family has long-term to support our community."

The 2023 GOLF IS BEING HELD:

- **Tuesday, Dec. 5,** from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at the President's Home, 718 Almond Drive, in Coalinga.
- **Thursday, Dec. 7,** from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Dulford High School, 22 Stratton Rd., Rutland.
- **Wednesday, Dec. 13,** from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at Elm Lodge (#345 at 44-46 Pleasant St. in Rutland.
- **Friday, Dec. 15,** from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Elm Lodge (#345 at 44-46 Pleasant St. in Rutland.

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Today's Drive At Green Mountain Power



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After Slate Ridge inspection, judge reissues arrest warrant for Daniel Banyai

A previous arrest warrant was never executed

By Ethan Weinstein/VTDigger

Following an official inspection of Slate Ridge late last week, a judge determined that Daniel Banyai had not brought his property into compliance, reissuing a warrant for his arrest.

“The threat of incarceration is the only remaining tool at the Court’s disposal to encourage compliance,” Thomas Durkin, a Vermont Superior Court environmental division judge overseeing the case, wrote in a court filing on Monday, Dec. 4.

Durkin directed his decision to the Rutland County Sheriff’s Department and Vermont State Police, giving them explicit permission to enter Banyai’s property to arrest him. The judge also ordered Banyai to turn himself in to the Vermont Department of Corrections by Dec. 22.

Banyai’s property, a gun range used for paramilitary weapons training, terrified its West Pawlet neighbors, who said they heard explosions and confronted heavily armed men during the site’s operation.



File photo by Glenn Russell/VTDigger
Daniel Banyai, owner of Slate Ridge, a gun range used for paramilitary weapons training in West Pawlet, appeared for a contempt hearing in Environmental Court in Rutland.

Last week’s site visit was the latest development in a multiyear saga in which the town of Pawlet has asked the state environmental court to require Banyai to remove buildings from his property.

This summer, Judge Durkin declared Banyai in contempt of a March 2021 court order to dismantle unpermitted structures from Slate Ridge. He issued

an arrest warrant for Banyai, and ordered him to pay more than \$100,000 in fines.

Banyai later contended that he had complied with the court’s requirements, submitting photographs to the court, though he did not allow Pawlet officials to inspect his property at the time. Meanwhile, he appealed the case to the Vermont Supreme Court, and his arrest warrant

expired without Vermont State Police or the Rutland County Sheriff’s Department executing it within the 60-day period that it remained active.

After last week’s site visit, Pawlet officials, submitting photographs as evidence, wrote in court filings that the property was not compliant with court orders.

“Certain structures have
Slate Ridge → 29

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\$75,000 is going to pay the pension deficit.

Markowski asked the board for guidance on future use of the funds. She anticipated some money would go toward paving in July.

“Those are the things I feel like we need to be considering,” Markowski said

Markowski said she had not yet verified if all that money was going to Rutland City.

Rutland Town, which also has an option tax, shares a zip code with some city residents, creating confusion for people who shop online, where the tax is automatically applied based on zip codes.

Former City Clerk Henry Heck also attended the meeting to speak about his petition to change the clerk position from appointed to elected.

Heck, who was not reappointed to by new Mayor Mike Doenges earlier this year after just over 14 years in his role, clarified to board members that he would not be seeking reelection to the position and stood nothing to gain from the potential change.

Heck said he would not be putting his name on the ballot.

“It’s a job I will never hold again,” he said.

Woodstock Rotary Club surpasses fundraising goal to replace star on Mt. Tom

The Woodstock VT Rotary Club received enormous support from the community in their fundraising efforts to replace the star on Mt. Tom. As of Nov. 29, the club surpassed the fundraising goal of \$120,000.

The club intends to establish a fund for the ongoing repair and maintenance of the star from donations in excess of the \$120,000 goal. Points of light will be available with name recognition on a plaque at the base of the star until Dec. 31. For more information, visit: tinyurl.com/Woodstock-VT-Star-Donation.



Submitted

The star on Mt. Tom in Woodstock shines down on the Village.

MOUNTAIN TIMES

is a community newspaper covering Central Vermont that aims to engage and inform as well as empower community members to have a voice.

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Coley property sold in Hartland

By Curt Peterson

Even late-comers to Hartland will remember the eyesore at the end of Weed Road — there was a self-destructing house and fence, but by February 2015 the rotting structure was gone, laying bare an illegal junkyard containing an eclectic collection of cars, trucks, a trailer, and unrecognizable junk, all networked together by overgrown weeds, vines and bushes on both sides of the road.

The Hartland selectboard successfully obtained the legal right to clean up the site after the Coley family, owners, had failed to comply with a court order to do it themselves, and failed to keep tax payments current. Dusty Hodgman, part-owner of Hodgman Brothers Scrap Yard in Ascutney, and Ed Tobin of Independent Drive in Hartland, self-described “Junkers,” contracted to do the clean-up during one of the coldest weeks of the winter.

The feud over this property goes back to a 1967 law prohibiting unregistered, unusable vehicles on private property.

Hodgman, 58 in 2015, said, “When I was eighteen the town was trying to clean up this property. Now here I am, forty-five years later, actually doing it.”

The duo did a good job. Now, seven years later, the town has an \$88,000 lien for fines and interest on the property, and it is being sold.

Interim Town Manager Martin Dole told the selectmen Monday night, as he introduced attorney Beriah Smith of the Sitzel, Page and Fletcher law firm in Burlington, that there is a final offer on the table. Smith has been working with the Coley interests’ attorney to negotiate a release of the lien.

“The lien exceeds the fair market value of the property,” Dole explained, as he told the board the town would receive net proceeds from the sale after the Realtor commission and the sellers’ legal fees are deducted — \$64,500 plus unpaid taxes, according to the Coleys’ proposal.

Selectman Jim Reilly made a motion to accept the negotiated offer, and it was approved unanimously. Smith was to consummate the transaction Tuesday morning and get the paperwork done.

After more than 50 years, Hartland’s struggle over “the Coley property” will finally be over.

Rutland jury finds former child care provider guilty of fatally medicating infant

Stacey Vaillancourt was convicted of manslaughter and child cruelty at the end of a five-day trial, Dec. 1

By Tiffany Tan/VTDigger

A former child care provider in Rutland was found guilty Friday, Dec. 1, of causing a child’s death by giving the infant a sedative, which the defendant denied doing when she took the stand earlier that day.

A Rutland County jury found Stacey Vaillancourt guilty of both manslaughter and child cruelty resulting in the death of 6-month-old Harper Rose Briar in 2019. She faces up to 25 years in prison at her sentencing, which has yet to be scheduled.

Vaillancourt, 58, remains free on a \$50,000 unsecured appearance bond, which she would be required to pay if she fails to appear in court.

The jury announced its verdict around 7:30 p.m. Friday, the last day of Vaillancourt’s five-day trial and about four hours after jurors began deliberating.

The state sought to prove that Vaillancourt had fatally sedated Harper — who was described by witnesses as having difficulty sleeping for long periods — on Jan. 24, 2019, the baby’s third day at her in-home child care program.

Dr. Elizabeth Bundock, Vermont’s chief medical examiner, ruled that the



File photo by Tiffany Tan, VTDigger

Rutland County State’s Attorney Ian Sullivan showed the jury video clips of the baby on Monday, Nov. 27, the first day of Stacey Vaillancourt’s trial in Rutland Superior criminal court.

child died of intoxication from diphenhydramine, an antihistamine that has sedative effects and is the active ingredient in medication such as Benadryl. The child had not been prescribed this type of medication.

The chief prosecutor, Rutland County State’s Attorney Ian Sullivan, said Harper had been healthy and active up until she was dropped off with Vaillancourt around 8 a.m. on Jan. 24. He said the

baby was solely in Vaillancourt’s care until around 3 p.m., when emergency responders were called after Vaillancourt found that the baby was not breathing. Harper was pronounced dead at the local hospital shortly after 4 p.m.

“For hours and hours, Harper was only in the care of the defendant,” Sullivan told jurors in his closing arguments Friday. He said Dr. Bundock had consid-

ered, and ruled out, other potential causes of death, such as external trauma and infectious diseases.

Defense lawyers, on the other hand, argued that someone else could have fatally medicated the child before she arrived at Vaillancourt’s home. Lead defense attorney Robert McClallen said investigators never recovered any medicine with diphenhydramine

Trial → 7

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RRMC receives national recognition

The American College of Surgeons National Surgical Quality Improvement Program (ACS NSQIP) has recognized Rutland Regional Medical Center, as one of 78 ACS NSQIP participating hospitals that have achieved meritorious outcomes for surgical patient care in 2022. As a participant in ACS NSQIP, Rutland Regional is required to track the outcomes of inpatient and outpatient surgical procedures and collect data that assesses patient safety and can be used to direct improvement in the quality of surgical care.

Rutland Regional is among a select group of hospitals that has achieved a meritorious composite score in either an "All Cases" category or a category which includes higher risk cases ("High Risk"). Risk-adjusted data from the July 2023 ACS NSQIP Semiannual Report, which represents data from the 2022 calendar year, were used to determine which hospitals demonstrated meritorious outcomes. Rutland Regional has been recognized on both the "All Cases" and "High Risk" Meritorious lists.

"This is a great reflection of the terrific work of our surgeons, OR staff, and recovery teams," said Matt Conway, general surgeon and NSQIP champion at Rutland General Surgery at Rutland Regional Medical Center. "Continuity of care is so important and receiving recognition in both 'All Cases' and 'High Risk' categories means that we are hitting the high standards we have set for ourselves"

Each composite score was determined through a different weighted formula combining eight outcomes. The outcome performances related to patient management were in the following eight clinical areas: mortality, unplanned intubation, ventilator > 48 hours, renal failure, cardiac incidents

(cardiac arrest and myocardial infarction); respiratory (pneumonia); SSI (surgical site infections-superficial and deep incisional and organ-space SSIs); or urinary tract infection.

The 78 commended hospitals achieved the distinction based on their outstanding composite quality score across the eight areas listed above. Rutland Regional Medical Center was one of 46 hospitals to be recognized on both the "All Cases" and the "High Risk" lists, representing approximately 7% of the 615 calendar-year 2022 ACS NSQIP hospitals.

Rutland Regional's OR consists of five operating rooms accommodating surgical procedures across a broad spectrum of specialties including orthopedic, cancer, urology, ophthalmology, OBGYN, ear, nose and throat, and general surgery to name a few.

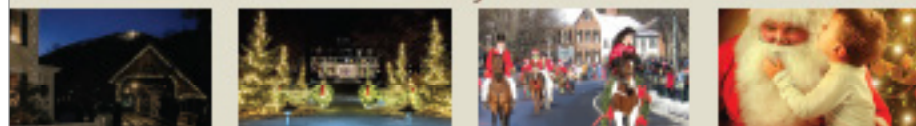
ACS NSQIP is the only nationally validated quality improvement program that measures and enhances the care of surgical patients. This program measures the actual surgical results 30 days postoperatively as well as risk adjusts patient characteristics to compensate for differences among patient populations and acuity levels. The goal of ACS NSQIP is to reduce surgical morbidity (infection or illness related to a surgical procedure) and surgical mortality (death related to a surgical procedure) and to provide a firm foundation for surgeons to apply what is known as the "best scientific evidence" to the practice of surgery. Furthermore, when adverse effects from surgical procedures are reduced and/or eliminated, a reduction in health care costs follows. ACS NSQIP is a major program of the American College of Surgeons and is currently used in nearly 850 adult and pediatric hospitals.



Wassail Weekend

Dec. 8-9-10, 2023

Woodstock, Vermont



Woodstock Vermont's favorite time of year! Filled with twinkling lights, historic decorated homes, and so much more, the town transforms into the holiday wonderland of your dreams, complete with sleigh bells and holiday decorations at Billings Farm that harken back to historic 19th-century charm.

There's something for all ages throughout this festive holiday weekend.

38th Annual Wassail Parade

Dec. 9, 2023 at 2PM

Woodstock, Vermont

OBITUARY

Remembering Gwen Allard's commitment to adaptive sports

The Adaptive Sports Foundation (ASF) is sad to report the passing of the organization's founder, Gwen Allard, who passed away peacefully on Nov. 28 at the age of 86.

Allard was born in 1937 and strapped on her first pair of skis when she was just 4 years old. A Schenectady native, she was influenced and taught to ski by Frederica Anderson, who quickly became Allard's role model. In 1964, Anderson gave Allard her first chance at instructing and the rest is history. In the 1970s, Allard founded the Gore Mountain Adaptive Program. She quickly realized that there needed to be a standardized teaching method for instructors to teach individuals with disabilities.

In 1983, Allard became the first executive director of the Professional Ski Instructors of America-Eastern Education Foundation (PSIA-EEF). It was in that role and at the direction of the PSIA-EEF Board of Directors, she began a research and development project at Ski Windham on how to teach skiing to people with disabilities. What started as an R&D project quickly became the Ski Windham Adaptive Program (SWAP). The initial program started with Allard as the director, six volunteers, 20 students from the local ARC and a storage shed in the parking lot of Ski Windham. By 1990, SWAP went through a name change, becoming the Disabled Ski Program at Ski Windham, moved into an office inside the base lodge, and grew to having three staff members, 60 volunteer instructors and 800 students. The Disabled Skiing Council (the predecessor to the current ASF Board of Trustees) was also created to help with fundraising and future strategic planning.

Under Allard's leadership, the Disabled Ski Program at Ski Windham became known as Gwen Allard → 31



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← Superstar:

from page 1

(KMS) to tie the entire program together.

“We are proud to be a strong partner with Killington in this training project,” said KMS Head of School Claire Butler. “The resort is unmatched in their support of youth ski racing and competitive winter sport. Killington’s recognition of the opportunity they have here with two venues prepared for World Cup training and racing is next level. Having access to this training right in our backyard is game changing for not only our program at Killington Mountain School, but for the many programs who will call Killington home for the week following the World Cup. We are seeing teams from across the Northeast, as well as foundations like the Killington World Cup Foundation and World Cup Dreams, taking advantage of this premium, close-to-home training environment. Not to mention all of the national teams who are staying to train. That kind of exposure for young athletes to watch and ride lifts with their heroes is invaluable.”

“This is a very unique opportunity even for World Cup teams,” said KMS Alpine Program Director Miha Kurner. “They are always almost in a paranoid state because of how hard it is to find training the next day. Killington is the place to be in November, everyone will know that after this season.”

Some 350 skiers from 23 different clubs, academies and universities from around the Northeast came to Killington to take advantage of the week. Normally, they’d have to travel to places such as Colorado or Europe to find something similar. A few smaller clubs, including Smuggler’s Notch and Cochran’s Ski Club of Vermont, Franconia Ski Club of New Hampshire and Winter4kids of New Jersey received help from the Killington World Cup Foundation to make their training a reality.

“It is so important it is for young skiers in the develop-

ment stage to face such conditions,” said Kurner. “In an ideal world, athletes should be exposed to different conditions periodically throughout their developmental phase. What we see in practice, though, is that there is always this missing piece in the athletes’ developmental process: the amount of time spent under proper conditions. A lot of the athletes meet World Cup conditions so late in their careers and for the very first time.”

And the venue created for these aspiring athletes is about more than just the perfect conditions for training.

“To me, it’s like a kind of sports festival,” said Kurner. “One of the most wonderful things in sports is seeing different programs from different parts of the world pursue the same goals in the same place. A culture is created, a fruitful competitive atmosphere that strengthens and accelerates learning. From the chairlift you can see how your peers are doing. Conversations between them broaden horizons, friendships are forged, motivation goes straight through the roof in these times. A coach cannot create such an environment by themselves. Some of the skiers are older and more experienced; seeing them at work is actually a learning method. This helps immensely. But if you happen to catch Mikaela Shiffrin or another World Cup competitor skiing down the slope, then that’s actually the highest form of training you can get as an athlete; same top conditions for everyone, plus a demonstration of how it’s done. Bingo. It’s kind of like playing basketball together with LeBron or swinging golf on the range with Tiger. That’s how it is.”

The results of this will be seen in races all season long, multiple coaches agreed.

“Imagine how Superman feels on earth, pretty super, we can say,” said Kurner. “This is how athletes feel in a regular FIS race after some World Cup training exposure. Pretty super.”

← Pico:

from page 1

emissions and fuel consumption.

The resort plans to run the Golden Express Quad and Summit Quad opening weekend. Uphill Travel will also open at this time.

Tickets and rentals are available opening day, but lessons will start on Friday, Dec. 15. The cafeteria will be open with limited services, the

Last Run Lounge will open for the season on Friday, Dec. 15.

Bring food donations Dec. 15-17

Pico Mountain will be collecting donations for BROCC so guests are encouraged to bring a non-perishable food item to donate Friday, Dec. 15 through Sunday,

Dec. 17. Pico Mountain will match all donations to make sure our neighbors don’t go hungry this holiday season. Food donations will be accepted at the old ticketing office, on the left side while walking towards the mountain.

For more information or to purchase tickets, visit: Picomountain.com (all tickets must be purchased online). Vermont students in grades K-12 can enjoy Pico Mountain all season long for just \$134.

Pico Mountain lift hours are 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays, and 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. during weekends and on peak days.

“This is actually a week ahead of schedule thanks to the cool November weather and our increased snowmaking capacity, and we are thrilled to offer more terrain than usual,” said McCoy.



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← Trial: from page 4

from Vaillancourt. He said the drug was only found in the baby's milk bottle, which her parents had provided Vaillancourt.

The defense's expert witness, Scott Lukas, who specializes in pharmacology and toxicology, said the level of diphenhydramine found in Harper's blood meant she was given multiple doses of the medication 24-36 hours before her death.

If the child had received only one toxic dose of diphenhydramine, her blood would have reflected a significantly higher concentration of the drug, said Lukas, a professor at Harvard Medical School and director of McLean Hospital's Behavioral Psychopharmacology Research Laboratory.

During his closing statements, Sullivan said, "Even if the assumption about multiple doses is true, there's certainly hours and hours and hours on the 24th where the defendant had the opportunity to provide multiple doses to Harper."

In her hourlong testimony, Vaillancourt acknowledged that the baby had some difficulty going to sleep

In her hourlong testimony, Vaillancourt acknowledged that the baby had some difficulty going to sleep but denied ever giving her a sedative. "Never," Vaillancourt said.

but denied ever giving her a sedative. "Never," Vaillancourt said when defense attorney McClallen asked if she'd ever given the infant any food or medication outside what her parents provided.

In the nearly 26 years she ran her state-licensed child care program, Vaillancourt said, she'd never been disciplined by regulators, though she admitted to putting a blanket on Harper's legs knowing there was a policy that prohibited child care providers from putting blankets on infants.

Sullivan asked Vaillancourt about several earlier in-

cidents in which she received notices of violation, such as taking in more children than the maximum her license

allowed and leaving children in the care of her teenage daughter. Vaillancourt said she couldn't remember most of the incidents.

When the jury foreperson announced the first "guilty" verdict — to the charge of manslaughter — some people in the courtroom gallery and those watching the proceedings online erupted into cheers. This led Judge Cortland Corsones to warn spectators to maintain silence. "If I hear any more noise, I will clear the courtroom," he said.

Vaillancourt and her attorneys have 14 days to file an appeal.

FOLA's 'Love Letters' raised over \$2,000 for Parkinson's

The recent FOLA (Friends of Ludlow Auditorium) production of the play, "Love Letters," drew a very large audience whose donations exceeded \$2,000. Featuring Linda and George Thomson as the readers, the play, by A. R. Gurney, told the story of two people writing to each other as they went through two very different lives. It showed how two very different personalities could develop a strong and deep affection that transcended a very sedate life compared to one that was full of chaos. All donations from the play will be donated to the Michael J. Fox Parkinson Foundation in memory of Janet Pace, long time Secretary and founding member of FOLA, who passed away due to Parkinson's Disease.

Chester vet clinic raises money for pet fund

This past weekend, the staff at the Rockingham Veterinary Clinic on Main Street in Chester sponsored a "Photos of Pets with Santa" event at their offices. Residents brought their cats, Dobermans, Retrievers, Labradors, Bloodhounds, Chihuahuas, and other lovable critters to pose with Santa for holiday pictures.

All of the voluntary donations went towards the Foxy Fund, Senior Solutions' program that delivers pet food to home-bound seniors and assists with veterinary bills. A total of \$404 was raised by the staff, who decorated the office and came outfitted as elves and helpers, and even the pets seemed excited at the prospect of meeting Santa. Senior Solutions was present on-site to assist with the tail-wagging excitement.

Participants also took part in a contest to guess the number of Milkbones filling a huge glass jar. The contest was won by Fred Probst, whose guess of 300 was nearly spot-on: there were 297 treats in the jar!



Submitted Santa visited Rockingham Veterinary in Chester for a photo op.

Festival of Trees & Vendor Village at the Killington Grand Hotel

KILLINGTON PICO
AREA ASSOCIATION

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8
4:30 - 9pm
School Concert Night
Community Mixer
Castleton Quartet

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9
9:00am - 6pm
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Environmentalists call for low-emission electricity from socially just sources

The grassroots climate justice organization 350Vermont is seeking to pressure utilities to sell energy using renewable sources while producing fewer or no greenhouse gases. The organization will do this by ratcheting up pressure on the Legislature to tighten up the state's Renewable Energy Standard.

350Vermont and its volunteers from across the state hosted a press conference Tuesday, Nov. 28 at the statehouse in Montpelier with a video message from Bill McKibben and remarks from other climate justice advocates.

The Renewable Energy Standard (RES) determines how much electricity utilities are required to source from renewable energy and what the definition of "renewable energy" is.

Lawmakers along with stakeholders from utilities and environmental groups have spent the fall taking another look at the RES in a Legislative Working Group.

On Dec. 6, the working group will come out publicly with its recommendations.

As the committee debates final recommendations, 350VT and allies will reiterate the urgency of the climate crisis as the state recovers from a summer of flooding and wildfire smoke. Speakers will highlight the need for a change to the RES — one that genuinely reduces greenhouse gas emission through more new solar and wind energy.

They will also advocate for a RES that does not count as "renewable" any energy source that still significantly adds to climate pollution. Speakers will call for Vermont to live up to its green reputation, and urge lawmakers to create the legal foundation for electricity in our state to come from 60% new wind and solar by 2035.

350Vermont cites what it says are shortcomings of the Renewable Energy Standard:

The RES definition of renewable energy includes large-scale hydropower from Hydro-Quebec, which causes significant ecological damage, produces methane emissions,



Submitted

350Vermont is seeking to pressure utilities to sell energy using renewable sources.

and destroys traditional Indigenous lands.

The RES allows utilities to meet their renewable-energy obligations by purchasing renewable energy credits while providing nonrenewable energy.

The RES does not take into account out-of-state greenhouse gas emissions from the production of energy — like large hydro — imported by Vermont.

The RES disincentivizes in-state production of cleaner, affordable energy (like solar and wind).

"If we continue on our current path, we will not be able to meet our climate goals," said 350Vermont spokesperson Rebecca Dalgin, in a press release.

In addition to hearing from the legislative working group and environmentalist McKibben, speakers included farmer Jaiel Pulskamp; Earl Hatley, enrolled citizen of Missisquoi band of Abenaki Nation, environmental scientist and cofounder of LEAD Agency; and small business owner Jessica Van Oort.

Vermont is changing how it tracks Covid-19 in the state's wastewater

Experts believe the new system will provide a clearer picture of Covid and leave the door open for more disease tracking

By Erin Petenko/VTDigger

Bob Fischer, water quality superintendent for South Burlington, remembers when researchers first realized that they could track the health of a population through its sewer system decades ago.

Measuring all the molecules and organisms that can show up in wastewater requires techniques and tools that started to be developed in the 1980s and 1990s.

Back then, public health officials discussed using it to track drug use at a citywide level. Fischer noticed then that the levels of one substance in particular — caffeine — would go up in the bay whenever University of Vermont students would come back for a semester, and that still happens.

"The fish are probably jonesing when the holiday breaks come," he said.

More recently, wastewater surveillance has become one of the most promising ways to track diseases like Covid-19 by measuring the prevalence of signs left by the vi-

rus in a community's sewer system.

Experts have said that what we all flush down the drain can offer a more comprehensive picture of what is circulating than individual testing results — most Covid testing today are of the rapid in-home variety that are not regularly reported. Wastewater testing also provides an earlier warning sign than a metric such as the number of people hospitalized with a virus.

However, since the Vermont Dept. of Health began including wastewater information in its weekly Covid reports in 2022, the tracking effort has been plagued with missing data and confusing or contradictory indicators.

State officials hope a new company on the scene can resolve some of the ongoing issues.

Three wastewater systems in Vermont — South Burlington, Essex Junction and Montpelier — are now sending water samples to WastewaterSCAN, a research program run by scientists at Stanford

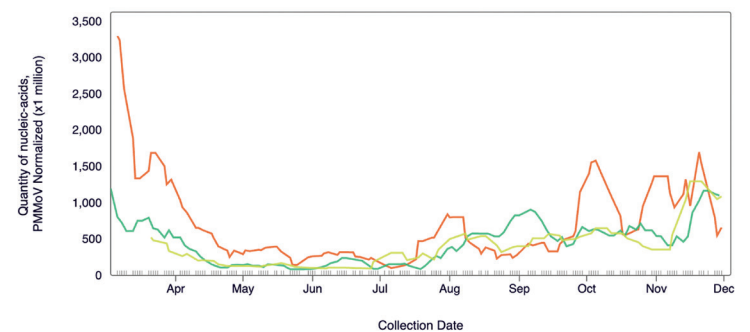
University and Emory University. The program has partnered with Verily, a health technology company owned by Google-parent company Alphabet Inc., which recently won a contract to support the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's national wastewater surveillance system.

Lynn Blevins, an epidemiologist for the health department, is hopeful that the new data and a new way of displaying that data provided by the new contractor will provide a clearer view of how Covid is spreading in Vermont.

"We felt like people would be more informed by this graph than the prior table, especially going into respiratory season (and) going into holiday seasons," she said.

The weeks after Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's historically have been the toughest time for Covid in Vermont. The disease hit its peak in January 2022, when the first Omicron strain spread rapidly and strained hospitals and

SARS-CoV-2, Vermont



• Sample collected
 ● Montpelier, VT (Montpelier Water Resource Recovery Facility)
 ● Essex Junction, VT (City of Essex Junction Wastewater Treatment Facility)
 ● South Burlington, VT (South Burlington-Airport Parkway WWTF)

health care providers.

The health department reported on Wednesday that Covid levels remain "low," based on their criteria of hospital admissions for the disease. The department said that 47 people had been newly admitted to hospitals for Covid in the past week, up from 36 the week before.

That's far from the peak of more than 20 admissions each day during the Omicron wave. Blevins charac-

terized Covid in Vermont as "pretty good" for winter.

Like hospitalizations, data from WastewaterSCAN also indicates that Covid levels are slowly rising. WastewaterSCAN data is only available for the three sites (down from the 11 or so sites that have at times reported wastewater data to the CDC), focusing efforts only on cities with a population of 10,000 or more.

'Not acceptable'

That was how Governor Scott responded to the Nov. 30 letter from the Tax Commissioner, which projected an 18.5% increase in the average statewide education property tax rate for next year. The annual letter, required by law, bases the increase on an estimated 12% hike in school budgets and revenue forecasts for the state's Education Fund.



By Rep. Jim Harrison

The letter is used by school districts to project local tax rates as they develop their budgets.

The 12% number comes from a survey of school district budget writers but does not necessarily reflect what voters will approve of in March. That will be the number that counts. It is driven in part by a 16% increase in health care, negotiated contract increases, loss of pandemic era federal funds, universal school meals and other inflationary pressures. It is important to note that property taxes represent two-thirds of the Ed Fund revenues (non-homestead 36%, homestead 30%). The sales tax accounts for 27% of the fund revenues and 7% comes from other state taxes. If the sales tax and other revenues do not go up at the same rate as overall budgets, then the burden falls to the property tax to make up the difference.

The legislature will not set the overall state tax rate until the spring after there is a clearer picture of what the approved school budgets will total. In the meantime, there will no doubt be significant scrutiny by local school boards preparing their respective school spending plans.

The governor went on to say, "For years, I have warned that Vermont is unaffordable for too many families and small businesses. This is why for seven years I focused on holding the line on higher taxes and fees, while offering solutions to reduce the tax

burden on Vermonters. And for six out of the seven years, we were successful in preventing new taxes and fees.

"We should all agree it is time for us to take our affordability crisis seriously..."

Scott's reference to six out of seven years no doubt reflects several legislature veto overrides this past spring on bills that included new taxes, fees and energy standards.

Other key issues expected in the upcoming session:

- Public Safety concerns will receive a great deal of attention given increasing crime throughout Vermont. The House Speaker has signaled support for changing retail theft laws, while the Governor is expected to unveil a host of public safety proposals.
- The shortage of housing options will continue to be a priority for State House leaders and the Governor. With a somewhat limited capacity to add more state dollars for housing projects, there could be renewed interest in exploring regulatory changes or other incentives to spur more development.
- There will likely be a review of options to curtail the increasing drug usage, which has led to increased crime and overdoses.
- Proponents of paid family leave, which passed the House last session, will be lobbying the Senate to pass the new benefit program. The Governor opposes the new payroll tax, that is included in the bill, to fund the 12-week leave.
- There will be considerable dis-

Harrison → 12



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GUEST EDITORIAL

A stronger state economy and Vermont Chamber's 2024 legislative priorities

By Megan Sullivan

Editor's note: Megan Sullivan, of Jericho, is the vice president of government affairs for the Vermont Chamber of Commerce.

Last year at this time, the Vermont Chamber of Commerce shared that "amid a nation more divided than ever, Vermont remains a leader in unity, particularly when it comes to agreeing on the top issues facing our state. If we can agree on the problems, we are confident we can find balanced solutions. Vermonters agree on the 'what,' and we look forward to working together to find common ground on the 'how.'"

As we approach the second half of the biennium, this sentiment remains true.

Businesses statewide trust the Vermont Chamber to prioritize collaboration and uphold the core values that define our state. Our team meets with legislators and businesses year-round because our work to advance the Vermont economy never stops. We also meet with local stakeholder groups across Vermont to further inform our legislative priorities.

In 2024, the Vermont Chamber will focus our advocacy efforts on three key pillars of opportunity.

1) Workforce housing:

Meeting the need for 80,000 new units of housing by 2035 will require a coordinated approach and bold strategic solutions to bolster efforts that are already underway. Collectively, our state land use regulations and programs must be modernized to reflect the needs of Vermonters today and in the next 20 years.

We can protect our highly sensitive natural resources while also reforming permitting and Act 250 to allow for growth. Exemptions, more predictable and consistent processes, and redesigning state designation programs will support and incentivize resilient smart growth in larger geographic areas. We also need to invest in more solutions for middle-income Vermonters through appropriations and tax policy.

2) Business success:

Vermont businesses are going above and beyond to uplift their employees, customers and neighbors. Meanwhile, they also face significant affordability and workforce challenges. To give businesses time to implement pre-existing financial obligations, such as the first-ever payroll tax that was established last session, we are advocating for tax proposals to undergo rigorous assessment in comparison to both existing and forthcoming cost burdens.

Additionally, we will continue to build on our record of advocacy for workforce recruitment and retention strategies. This includes leveraging achievements like the Declaration of Inclusion initiative to encourage more people to move to Vermont, bolstering centers for technical education to meet the demand for vocational workers, and fully exempting military retiree pensions from taxation to attract and retain highly skilled workers for second careers in Vermont.

3) Recovery and resiliency:

Recovery programs must be replenished to address the collective unmet economic-injury need from the summer floods. Looking ahead, it's not a matter of if, but when, a severe weather event will hit Vermont again. Working with

Vt economy → 30



Happily Ever After? by Christopher Weyant, CagleCartoons

LETTERS

House Republicans issue statement on Dec. 1 tax letter

Dear Editor,

Vermont children are our most precious resource. Yet, we must be mindful that their care and public education is not supported by limitless resources. Unfortunately, the Education Tax Rate Letter released today does not provide balance that Vermonters can afford.

Last spring, school districts asked for an additional \$127 million from the education fund for the current school year, an 8% increase. Next school year they have proposed to further increase spending by \$205 million, a 12% increase.

Even after \$37 million of offsetting funds are applied the average Vermonter would experience an 18% increase in their education property tax bill next year. For a Vermonter paying property taxes on a modest \$250,000 home that translates to a \$600 increase. Even those that are income-sensitized would be hit hard. A senior living on a mix of Social Security and a modest retirement account that totals \$50,000 annually would see their net taxes increased by nearly \$200.

Renters would indirectly be burdened as well with rent increases.

Vermont incomes are not even close to keeping up with the increases being proposed by school districts in this Tax Letter. Vermont's economy also does not support these increases. In this Tax Letter broad based consumption taxes that reflect the underlying economy and wage growth are only increasing by 2.2%.

An economy growing at just over 2% does not support education spending increases of 12% with associated 18% property tax increases. No one is asking school districts to do more with less; we are simply asking them to limit their increases to a level that Vermonters can afford.

School district education spending requests for next year have not been finalized or warned, and importantly they have not been approved by voters. School boards must consider the tax burden being placed on taxpayers and change course.

The impact of these
Republicans → 12

Give blood, give life

Dear Editor,

As the 20th anniversary of the Gift-of-Life Marathon approaches, incredible memories have come flowing back. From the year Rutland set out to collect 1,000 pints, the effort captured in the documentary "The Blood in This Town," to breaking New England and national records, there are so many great moments to recall.

One of my favorites was the time Terry Jaye had to tell an enormous crowd of people that not everyone would be able to donate, as supplies were running low.

A series of favorite memories involve Stefanie Schaffer, who over the past five years blossomed before the community's collective eyes. Starting as a scared, injured young woman who faced unfathomable challenges after a boat explosion, she became a symbol of strength, courage, resilience, and love, and grew into a powerful advocate for blood donation and disability rights, and a symbol of the inner strength within
Blood → 12

Vt economy: from page 10

federal partners to identify and allocate funding is also paramount for proactive disaster preparedness initiatives. By implementing mitigation strategies, we can reduce the downtime of operations and revenue loss following future disasters. We can also help state agencies create or update standardized programs to mobilize during disaster response that efficiently meet the needs of those impacted.

Business vitality is crucial to the well-being of all Vermonters. This is why we are optimistic that legislative priorities and business needs can align during the 2024 legislative session.

As always, the Vermont Chamber legislative agenda is data-driven and cost-conscious, and we look forward to working with legislators to find solutions rooted in the economic reality of Vermont. We are also confident that our team has the institutional knowledge and pragmatic approach to leadership that will continue to achieve results for the Vermont business community. Learn more at vtchamber.com/advocacy.

CAPITAL QUOTES

Vermont property taxes could jump almost 20%. For a \$250,000 home, that would increase property taxes by about \$650.

“It’s very complicated, it’s very nuanced, and so I think it gets so complicated and people may disengage. So, I am hopeful that folks will engage with this,”

Vermont Tax Commissioner **Craig Bolio** said.

“Vermont’s tax burden is already, unfortunately, among the highest in the country, and families are bearing an incredible burden with increased costs of living across the board, including new and higher taxes and fees imposed by the Legislature. Put simply, a nearly 20% property tax increase would hurt Vermonters and our economy, and we cannot let it happen ... For years, I have warned that Vermont is unaffordable for too many families and small businesses. This is why for seven years I focused on holding the line on higher taxes and fees, while offering solutions to reduce the tax burden on Vermonters. And for six out of the seven years, we were successful in preventing new taxes and fees,”

Gov. Phil Scott said in a statement.

“This is not unique to Vermont, and it is happening in all sectors of the economy across the country,”

said House Speaker **Jill Krowinski** (D-Burlington)

“An economy growing at just over 2% does not support education spending increases of 12% with associated 18% property tax increases.”

House Republicans wrote in a letter.

COMMENTARY

Justice for Palestinians and security for Israel

By Sen. Bernie Sanders

There have been five wars in the last 15 years between Israel and Hamas. How do we end the current one and prevent a sixth from happening, sooner or later? How do we balance our desire to stop the fighting with the need to address the roots of the conflict? For 75 years, diplomats, well-intentioned Israelis and Palestinians and government leaders around the world have struggled to bring peace to this region. In that time an Egyptian president and an Israeli prime minister were assassinated by extremists for their efforts to end the violence.

And on and on it goes.

For those of us who want not only to bring this war to an end, but to avoid a future one, we must first be clear-eyed about facts. On Oct. 7, Hamas, a terrorist organization, unleashed a barbaric attack against Israel, killing about 1,200 innocent men, women and children and taking more than 200 hostage. On a per-capita basis, if Israel had the same population as the United States, that attack would have been the equivalent of nearly 40,000 deaths, more than 10 times the fatalities that we suffered on 9/11.

Israel, in response, under the leadership of its right-wing prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who is under indictment for corruption and whose cabinet includes outright racists, unleashed what amounts to total war against the Palestinian people. In Gaza, over 1.6 million Palestinians were forced out of their homes. Food, water, medical supplies and fuel were cut off. The United Nations estimates that 45 percent of the housing units in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed. According to the Gaza health ministry, more than 12,000 Palestinians, about half of whom are children, have been killed and many more wounded. And the situation becomes more dire every day.

This is a humanitarian catastrophe that risks igniting a wider regional conflagration. We all want it to end as soon as possible. To make progress, however, we must grapple with the complexity of this situation that too many people on both sides want to wave away.

First, Hamas has made it clear, before and after Oct. 7, that its goal is perpetual warfare and the destruction of the state of Israel. Just last week a spokesman for Hamas told The New York Times: “I hope that the state of war with Israel will become permanent on all the borders, and that the Arab world will stand with us.”

Second, Israel has done nothing in recent years to give hope for a peaceful

settlement — maintaining the blockade of Gaza, deepening the daily humiliations of occupation in the West Bank, and largely ignoring the horrendous living conditions facing Palestinians.

Needless to say, I do not have all of the answers to this never-ending tragedy. But for those of us who believe in peace and justice, it is imperative that we do our best to provide Israelis and Palestinians with a thoughtful response that maps out a realistic path to addressing the reality we face today. Here are my thoughts as to the best way forward and how the United States can rally the world around a moral position that moves us toward peace in the region and justice for the oppressed Palestinian population.

To start, we must demand an immediate end to Israel’s indiscriminate bombing, which is causing an enormous number of civilian casualties and is in

In Gaza, over 1.6 million Palestinians were forced out of their homes. Food, water, medical supplies and fuel were cut off.

violation of international law. Israel is at war with Hamas, not innocent Palestinian men, women and children. Israel cannot bomb an entire neighborhood to take out one Hamas target. We don’t know if this campaign has been effective in degrading Hamas’s military capabilities. But we do know that a reported 70% of the casualties are women and children, and that 104 U.N. aid workers and 53 journalists have been killed. That’s not acceptable.

There must also be a significant, extended humanitarian pause so that badly needed aid — food, water, medicine and fuel — can get into Gaza and save lives. If Wednesday morning’s deal — in which 50 Israeli hostages are to be freed in exchange for a four-day pause in fighting — is honored, it is a promising first step that we can build upon, and hopefully work to extend the pause. Meanwhile, the United Nations must be given time to safely set up the distribution network needed to prevent thirst, starvation and disease, to build shelters and evacuate those who need critical care. This window will also allow for talks to free as many hostages as possible. This extended pause must not precede a resumption of indiscriminate bombing. Israel will continue to go after Hamas, but it must dramatically change its tactics to minimize civilian harm.

← Republicans:

from page 10

possible tax increases are sobering, but when considered in the context of Vermont's crisis of housing affordability and availability they are nothing short of catastrophic.

We implore school boards to listen to Vermont taxpayers and chart a more compassionate and sustainable path.

← Blood:

from page 12

us. Like Stefanie, this year's GOLF ambassador, Alex Adams, reminds us that every donor helps save a life or changes lives for the better.

Please consider making an appointment for this year's GOLF on the website at redcrossblood.org.

Steve Costello, Rutland Town

← Harrison:

from page 7

cussion of how to best rebuild following the summer flooding and how to pay for it.

- Softening state revenues and the ending of pandemic era federal funding may mean force tough choices for the House and Senate budget committees. The Administration has already made it clear they will oppose new taxes to pay for ongoing spending. Meanwhile, some advocacy groups are promoting new taxes on higher income families.

The Administration has already made it clear they will oppose new taxes to pay for ongoing spending.

Jim Harrison is the state representative for Chittenden, Killington, Mendon and Pittsfield. He can be reached at: JHarrison@leg.state.vt.us or harrisonforvermont.com.

Stay tuned for further updates when the legislature returns to Montpelier on Jan. 3 for the 2024 session.

In closing I want to congratulate Mike Solimano and his team at the Killington Resort for their excellent job hosting the Women's World Cup event over Thanksgiving weekend. It was truly a world class event!

Best wishes to all this holiday season!

← Tax hike:

from page 1

putting upward pressure on education tax rates. That expected increase is due to several factors, Bolio said in the letter: inflation, the expiration of federal pandemic aid, and a roughly 16% increase in health care costs and payments on school construction or renovation projects.

One piece of good news is that sales tax revenue, which helps fund education, is expected to increase over last year. But because it's not considered "sure" revenue until in-hand, it can't be used in figuring the probable education tax rate, Bolio explained.

According to the letter, for every \$100 of property value, the actual average homestead property tax rate is expected to climb from \$1.54 in the current fiscal year to \$1.80 in fiscal year 2025, which begins July 1, 2024.

The average non-homestead rate — which covers properties that do not serve as an owner's residence — is expected to climb from \$1.60 in the current fiscal year to \$1.86 for every \$100 of property value. The homestead rate varies from town to town, depending on local spending on school districts. The non-homestead rate is not pegged to local school budgets but does reflect local property value appraisals.

About two-thirds of Vermont homestead taxpayers receive an income property tax credit, meaning their homestead property tax rates are based on income, rather than the value of their property. The average income tax rate is expected to increase from 2.33% in the current year to 2.67% in the upcoming fiscal year.

If the projections come to pass, property taxes on a \$250,000 home would increase by about \$650 in the next fiscal year, the letter said.

The estimated tax increases are due largely to a projected 12% jump in education spending, a figure that Bolio said he believed to be unprecedented. "I do not believe that in the history of the December 1 Letter there's ever been anything as large as 12%," he said.

In an interview, Bolio added another factor, Act 127, a law passed last year that is intended to direct more funding to school districts that need it more.

That law is expected to push up education spending statewide, although its exact impact remains unclear. The law includes a provision stipulating that year-over-year equalized tax rate increases (meaning increases before a property value appraisal system is factored in) are capped at 5%.

The tax department expects most of the school districts in the state to hit that 5% increase cap, meaning the rest of the money will be made up from the districts that don't hit that limit.

The "equalized pupil" formula that formerly meant more students could bring the cost per pupil down and avoid "over-spending penalties" by the Agency of Education. There is a current cap of \$15,554 per equalized pupil. The cap under the new law will be \$9,452.

"I struggle to understand it," said Jim Fenn, director of finance and operations for Mountain Views Supervisory Union, "but the bottom line is, the benefit from extra students has gone away."

"Our FY2025 budget proposal is 10.7% higher than last year's," Fenn said in a recent interview. "And the biggest driver of that increase is the cost of health insurance, which went up 16.5%. That alone adds \$840,000 to our budget."

Fenn said that since the state took over negotiations for state-wide health insurance for school districts five years ago, the cost has risen 88%. Consolidating school employees under one insurance plan hasn't provided hoped-for savings.

Bolio said there may be some ideas for resolving this dilemma floating around the statehouse, but nothing has yet been formally proposed.

In a statement released along with the letter, Gov. Phil Scott said the projected tax increase was "not acceptable" and called on the legislature to take action.

"Put simply, a nearly 20% property tax increase would hurt Vermonters and our economy, and we cannot let it happen," Scott said. "At a time when housing costs and interest rates are elevated, higher property taxes will make our housing and workforce crises worse."

"Put simply, a nearly 20% property tax increase would hurt Vermonters and our economy, and we cannot let it happen," Scott said "...Higher property taxes will make our housing and workforce crises worse."

← Sanders:

from page 11

If long-suffering Palestinians are ever going to have a chance at self-determination and a decent standard of living, there must be no long-term Israeli re-occupation and blockade of Gaza. If Hamas is going to be removed from power, as it must be, and Palestinians given the opportunity for a better life, an Israeli occupation of Gaza would be absolutely counterproductive and would benefit Hamas. For the sake of regional peace and a brighter future for the Palestinian people, Gaza must have a chance to be free of Hamas. There can be no long-term Israeli occupation.

To achieve the political transformation that Gaza needs, new Palestinian leadership will be required as part of a wider political process. And for that transformation and peace process to take place, Israel must make certain political commitments that will allow for Palestinian leadership committed to peace to build support. They must guarantee displaced Palestinians the absolute right to return to their homes as Gaza rebuilds. People who have lived in poverty and despair for years cannot be made permanently homeless. Israel must also commit to end the killings of Palestinians in the West Bank and freeze settlements there as a first step toward permanently ending the occupation. Those steps will show that peace can deliver for the Palestinian people, hopefully giving the Palestinian Authority the legitimacy it needs to assume administrative control of Gaza, likely after an interim stabilization period under an international force.

Finally, if Palestinians are to have any hope for a decent future, there must be a commitment to broad peace talks to advance a two-state solution in the wake of this war. The United States, the international community and Israel's neighbors must move aggressively toward that goal. This would include dramatically increased international support for the Palestinian people, including from wealthy Gulf States. It would also mean the promise of full recognition of Palestine pending the formation of a new democratically elected government committed to peace with Israel.

Let's be clear: This is not going to happen on its own. Mr. Netanyahu's Likud party was explicitly formed on the premise that "between the Sea and the Jordan [River]

there will only be Israeli sovereignty," and the current coalition agreement reinforces that goal. This is not just ideology. The Israeli government has systematically pursued this goal. The last year saw record Israeli settlement growth in the West Bank, where more than 700,000 Israelis now live in areas that the United Nations and the United States agree are occupied territories. They have used state violence to back up this de facto annexation. Since Oct. 7, the United Nations reports that at least 208 Palestinians, including 53 children, have been killed by Israeli security forces and settlers. This cannot be allowed to continue.

Mr. Netanyahu has made clear where he stands on these critical issues. So should we. If asking nicely worked, we wouldn't be in this position. The only way these necessary changes will happen is if the United States uses the substantial leverage we have with Israel. And we all know what that leverage is.

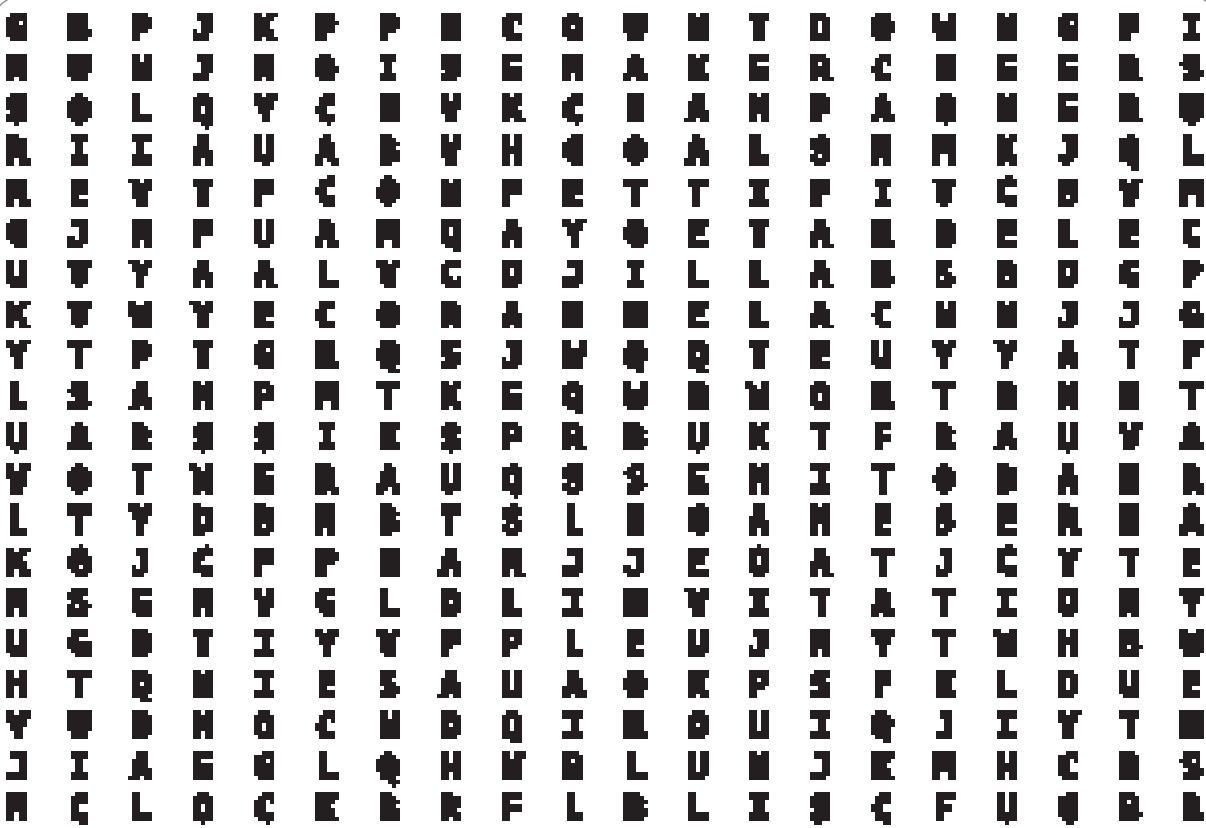
For many years, the United States has provided Israel substantial sums of money — with close to no strings attached. Currently, we provide \$3.8 billion a year. President Biden has asked for \$14.3 billion more on top of that sum and asked Congress to waive normal, already-limited oversight rules. The blank check approach must end. The United States must make clear that while we are friends of Israel, there are conditions to that friendship and that we cannot be complicit in actions that violate international law and our own sense of decency. That includes an end to indiscriminate bombing; a significant pause to bombing so that massive humanitarian assistance can come into the region; the right of displaced Gazans to return to their homes; no long-term Israeli occupation of Gaza; an end to settler violence in the West Bank and a freeze on settlement expansion; and a commitment to broad peace talks for a two-state solution in the wake of the war.

Over the years, people of good will around the world, including Israelis, have tried to address this conflict in a way that brings justice for Palestinians and security for Israel. I, and some other members of Congress, have tried to do what we could. Obviously, we did not do enough. Now we must recommit to this effort. The stakes are just too high to give up.

WORDPLAY

NEW YEAR'S WORD SEARCH

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'BABY
BALLOONS
CALENDAR
CELEBRATE
CHAMPAGNE

CHEERS
CLOCK
CONFETTI
COUNTDOWN
GAMES

GOALS
HAPPY
INVITATION
JANUARY
KISS

MIDNIGHT
NEWYEAR
NOISEMAKER
PARTY
RESOLUTION

STREAMER
TIMESQUARE
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SUDOKU

Solutions → 21

How to Play

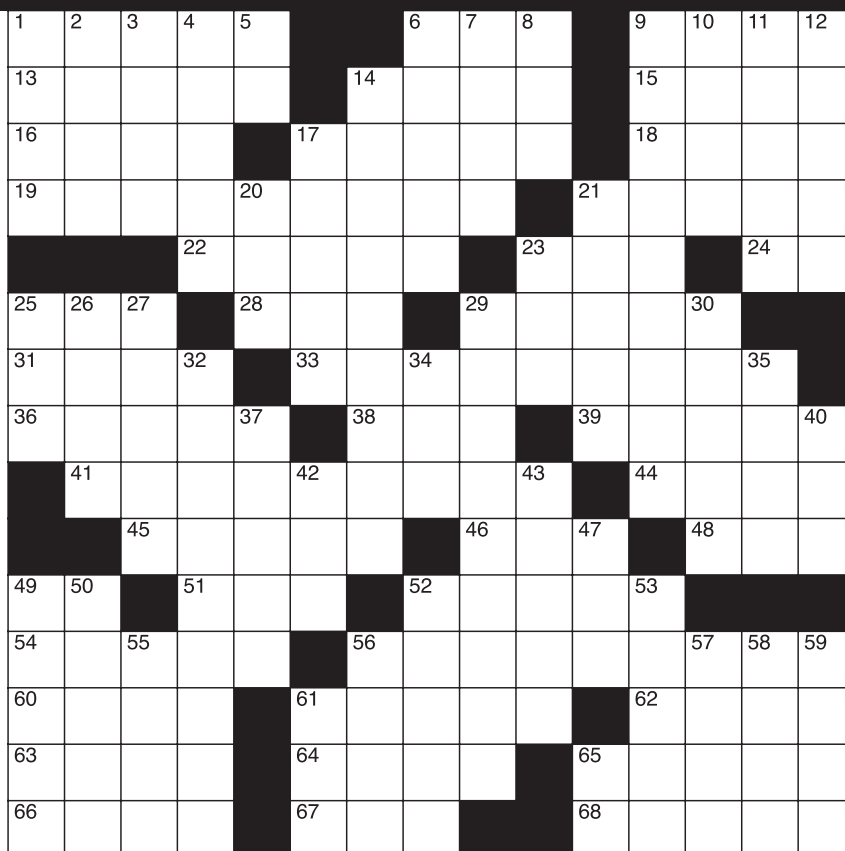
Each block is divided by its own matrix of nine cells. The rule for solving Sudoku puzzles are very simple. Each row, column and block, must contain one of the numbers from "1" to "9". No number may appear more than once in any row, column, or block. When you've filled the entire grid the puzzle is solved.

CROSSWORD PUZZLE

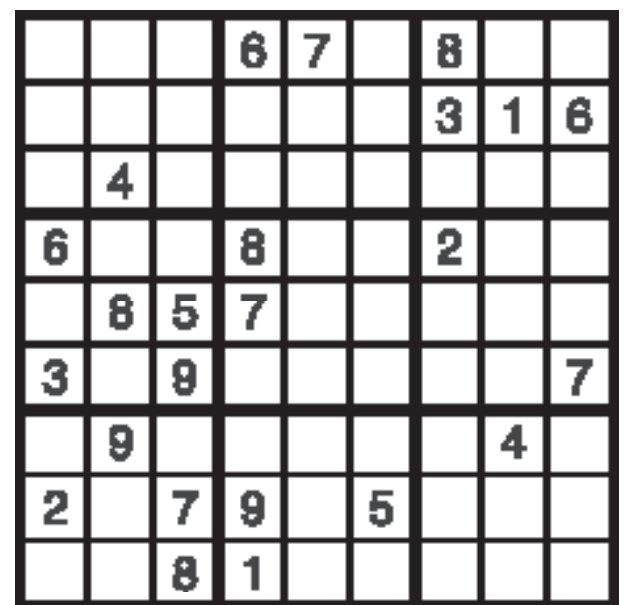
Solutions → 21

- CLUES ACROSS**
- Bleated
 - Snakelike fish
 - Database management system
 - Russian-American violinist
 - Wendy's founder Thomas
 - Ancient Italian-Greek colony
 - Negatives
 - Rescued
 - Self-immolation by fire ritual
 - Assigns tasks to
 - Island nation native
 - Trade
 - Detergent brand
 - Famed NY Giant
 - Before
 - Split pulses
 - Extremely angry; highly incensed
 - Body part
 - American state
 - David __, US playwright
 - Move one's head slightly
 - Secret rendezvous
 - Improved
 - A place to exercise
 - 18-year astronomical period
 - Automobile
 - You can take it
 - A radio band
 - Jaws of an

- CLUES DOWN**
- Curved segment
 - Wings
 - From pentane (Chemistry)
 - Gradually gets into
 - Commercial document (abbr.)
 - Overhang
 - Christmas and New Year's have them
 - Type of bulb
 - Lacking a plan
 - Tattle
 - Rockers like it "heavy"
 - One who's been canonized
 - Indicate time and place
 - Nobel Prize winner in physics
 - Short-billed rails
 - Chinese province
 - Shameless and undisguised
 - Horizontal passage into a mine
 - Adult males
 - Fail to entertain
 - Dried-up
 - City in north-central Utah
 - Southern U.S.
 - German river
 - Oxygen
 - Make law



- The voice of Olaf
- Fragmented rock
- They __
- Master of Philosophy
- Backside
- Landmark house in L.A.
- An act of undue intimacy
- From which a later word is derived
- Equal to 10 meters
- Neither
- Computer language
- Sacred book of Judaism
- A woolen cap of Scottish origin
- A way to dedicate
- Challenges
- British Air Aces
- Large, influential bank
- Portended
- Cavalry-sword
- Vaccine developer
- Napoleonic Wars general
- Italian Seaport
- Hip joint
- __ Clapton, musician
- Insect repellent
- Decorative scarf
- Delaware



Level: Intermediate

Guess Who?

I am an athlete born in Switzerland on January 4, 1999. I became the first Swiss player ever to be taken first in the NHL Entry Draft. My hockey fame has led to many followers on Instagram.

Answer: Nico Hischier