



STATE HOUSE

Council approves childcare funds

Four areas identified to help address the shortage of affordable care for children

By **MICHAELA TOWFIGHI**
Monitor staff

If New Hampshire could solve the state-wide childcare pinch, improvements are expected to related problems with the state's workforce shortage and economic growth. Simply put, it's a domino effect of positive generational outcomes, according to Joe Kenney, who represents the state's northern districts on the Executive Council.

And it's clear state leaders agree.

Last week Governor Chris Sununu signed his biennial budget and trailer bill into law, which invested \$15 million into the state's childcare workforce. Now, the Executive Council approved just over \$12 million in funding focused on childcare as well.

"If we can solve childcare in the state, we can solve pretty much everything else," said Kenney at the council's final meeting of the fiscal year.

While New Hampshire was recently ranked as the top state for children's well-being by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a lack of access to childcare still looms overhead.

In October of 2021, stakeholders

in the state's Department of Health and Human Services and the childcare sector were asked how to spend almost \$30 million in federal funding from the American Rescue Plan.

This group identified four main areas to address for children in New Hampshire: increase access to affordable childcare, build out the workforce, improve the quality of services offered and strengthen the overall system with state and local infrastructure and programming.

This funding must be spent by Sept. 30. With the contracts approved by the Executive Council at its Wednesday meeting, the state has allocated \$20.6 million so far.

This includes \$1.3 million to the

Southern New Hampshire Service Inc., which is the Community Action Program for Rockingham and Hillsborough counties, to create a network of childcare services for families in the area.

Another contract focused primarily on the business structure of facilities, approving \$3.5 million in funding for a Child Care Business Improvement Project. With this money, providers can focus on operational metrics like building health, mortgages and other expenses and strategic planning.

The funding also instates a partnership with the University of New

SEE **CHILDCARE A2**

STATE HOUSE

Lobbyist emails spark concern

Department of Environmental Services ran landfill bill language past Casella rep

By **SRUTHI GOPALAKRISHNAN**
Monitor Staff

As the legislative session approaches its end, a bill focusing on landfill setbacks is facing growing discontent following the public release of email exchanges between the state's Department of Environmental Services and representatives of Casella, a solid waste company trying to expand its operations in the North Country.

Emails obtained through a right-to-know request, filed by Jon Swan, an environmental activist opposed to the proposal to build a new Casella Waste Systems landfill in the town of Dalton disclosed the involvement of Bryan Gould, a lawyer and previously a lobbyist for Casella, in Senate Bill 61's revisions.

Michael Wimsatt, the Waste Management Division Director at DES, and Mark Sanborn, the Assistant Commissioner at DES, consulted with Gould on edits being made to the bill language, the emails showed.

SB 61 directs the NHDES to conduct a comprehensive review of its current regulations pertaining to setbacks for newly sited landfills in rela-

SEE **EMAIL A2**

PENACOOK: Strings and Things music shop relocating from downtown to former bank with a vision to turn it into an acoustically-friendly space



Geoff Forester / Monitor file

Strings and Things owner Mike Bilodeau plays guitar with his son, Eric, the C.F.O. of the company on the mandolin at their former downtown store in Concord in 2020. The store is relocating to Penacook in a building that previously housed Citizens Bank.

SET UP FOR SOUND

By **JAMIE L. COSTA**
Monitor staff

Globs of paint splattered across the wood floor as Michael Bilodeau wedged off the metal cover of his paint bucket.

Bilodeau poured the off-white paint into a tray for Austin Pratt, a local musician helping to bring new life into the old Citizens Bank on Village Street in Penacook, which will soon be the new home of Strings and Things Music.

"It's a really unique setup; we're going to hang acoustics from the ceiling and the former teller windows will be used for repairs and sales," Bilodeau said of the former bank layout.

Bilodeau and his son, Eric, decided it was time to purchase their own property during the winter of 2022 when the building they leased on South Main Street in downtown Concord was sold to Kelley Family Properties, a local realty group that owns

SEE **STRINGS A2**



Jamie L. Costa / Monitor staff

Ed Rimm, formerly of North Branch Construction, primes newly constructed walls in what will be lesson rooms on the second floor of Strings and Things Music. Co-owners Michael and Eric Bilodeau began renovating in March.

MERRIMACK VALLEY

Assistant promoted to high school principal

Sam York has been with school district for more than 20 years

By **RAY DUCKLER**
Monitor staff

Sam York, a longtime assistant principal at Merrimack Valley High School, has been elevated to the principal's role for the upcoming school year, replacing David Miller, who abruptly announced his resignation earlier this month to pursue other professional opportunities.

An official biography on York was not released by the school, nor were the specific reasons for Miller's departure. School Board Chair Seelye Longnecker said she's "known (York) for years. Great guy, great math teacher and well-known and well-liked within the high school for a long time."

An email from district Superintendent Randy Wormald said that York has been at Merrimack Valley for more than 20 years as a teacher, coach, coordinator and now principal. He's on vacation until July 10

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SPORTS

MEET THE CELTICS' LONE DRAFT PICK

Celtics' Jordan Walsh believes being stopper is route to being starter. **Page B1**

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Strings and Things relocates to Penacook

STRINGS FROM A1

several mixed-use properties throughout Concord.

In March, the father-and-son pair began renovating their new purchase to become the newest location for their family business, Strings and Things Music, which has moved seven times since it opened in 1982.

Over the last 41 years, the popular music store has offered lessons to children and adults, instrument repair, and sold musical equipment and books for beginners and advanced musicians.

"They're great tenants and I'm glad they're staying in Concord but I'm sorry to see them go," said Ben Kelley, owner of Kelley Family Properties. "I would have been happy to have them stay, but the timing works because I do want to see those buildings improved and give them a much-needed facelift."

With repairs, sales and lessons booming, the Bilodeaus have installed walls throughout the second floor of their new building to make space for several lesson rooms and an online sales room. Downstairs, they will capitalize on the unique space as a showroom with a private temperature-controlled room in the back for specific wooden instruments.

Until the big move in the fall, they will continue renovations with the help of Legacy Mechanical Plumbing, Irish Electric, R A Desmarais & Son and North Branch Construction.

Ahead of his purchase a year and a half ago, Kelley hoped to group together three parcels of land to include 111-113 South Main Street, a vacant lot abutting the property that is city-owned and a parcel of land owned by the state on Sexton and Storrs streets, he said. But sale negotiations are moving slowly.

For now, he plans to improve the building by replacing siding and roofing and enhancing the overall aesthetic of the exterior.

"I did not buy it explicitly to redevelop it; I view it as a gateway into Concord when paired with the potential of the city-owned property that abuts it and the state land on Sexton and Storrs streets,"



JAMIE L. COSTA / Monitor staff

Strings and Things Music, which has been operating in downtown Concord on South Main Street for the last 20 years, is relocating to Penacook Village. Co-owners Michael Bilodeau and his son, Eric, purchased the defunct Citizens Bank on Village Street for their new, permanent location.

Kelley said.

Once vacated by the business, work at the Main Street building is expected to begin by the end of the year with plans to keep the first floor retail-based while the second floor, which is now being used as lesson rooms by Strings and Things, will be converted into multi-family housing. Included in the sale was the Ethereal Tattoo property which will remain at its location for the foreseeable future.

"I look for value opportunities and that

is a site that, location-wise, is at a lit intersection on South Main Street and it happens to be tired and needs some attention," Kelley said. "It can be an important and impactful site if paired with the adjacent undeveloped parcels."

Kelley owns three additional mixed-use properties on North Main Street and notably bought the 65,000-square-foot, five-story brick office building at 6 Loudon Road for \$5.6 million in 2019 and sold it for \$10.5 million in 2022.

Lobbyist, DES email exchanges criticized

EMAIL FROM A1

tion to surface water bodies. The bill would also allocate funds to the department to hire an external consultant to conduct a study on landfill siting standards.

Wimsatt said it's not uncommon for the agency to work with all stakeholders and legislators to work on the content of the legislation.

"I don't know how it's an ethical issue for the agency; I think we have a role in answering people's requests for technical assistance, trying to understand bills, it's very common for legislators to be working with a number of parties, including lobbyist on the content of legislation," explained Wimsatt. "We, in fact, exchanged ideas and had things run by us from all the parties that have an interest in this particular bill and on all sides of the issue."

While the bill's intent to expand set-back requirements and measures to avoid conflicts of interest during contractor selection, has drawn attention, concern has grown about how the revisions were carried out.

"I corresponded with industry lobbyists hundreds of times; there's absolutely nothing wrong with that, although we tried to give equal access to citizens, which DES clearly fails utterly to do," said Adam Finkle, an environmental scientist who has worked as a regulatory official in the federal government for 12 years. "But never, ever, did I ask a lobbyist's permission to write or alter a word or sentence in a regulation or piece of legislation. That is beyond the pale and should never happen again."

Representative Kelley Pontenza, a Strafford Republican, expressed her strong disapproval of the bill's amendment process, asserting that it is fundamentally and ethically wrong. She also intends to file an ethics complaint with the Senate, House and the Department of Justice.

"It's not for the good of anything except for what's lining their pockets. I don't

care what side of the aisle you're on. I just don't think that's the way it should work at all," said Rep. Potenza, who added she was upset by the extent of lobbying and how lobbyists and interest groups have been involved in drafting legislation.

The Department of Environmental Services (DES) expressed approval of the bill's amendments in the conference committee report delivered last week which will be voted on by both chambers on Thursday.

The bill calls for a two-year moratorium on the permitting of new landfills in New Hampshire, with the option of a 90-day extension if the regulations are not revised within the specified timeframe.

In addition, the bill allocates \$200,000, which marks a \$50,000 increase in funding for a study to determine the safe distance between landfills and bodies of water.

The DES has already started updating its solid waste rules, which are set to expire in July 2024, by involving the public in the rule-making process through public hearings.

"The weirdest thing about this whole six months of discussion ending with this bill is that DES had to revise their rules anyway because they are expiring," Finkle pointed out, underscoring the need to revise rules irrespective of the legislature's involvement.

While Nora Bosworth, Staff Attorney for Conservation Law Foundation's Zero Waste Project, acknowledged the bill's potential ambiguities and stated that CLF would closely monitor DES's contractor selection, Rep. Potenza firmly believes that the bill should be eliminated in the current legislative session.

"Killing this bill is better than having the bill," said Potenza, claiming that once a private consultant is hired to conduct a study, the report goes directly to DES and cuts the legislature out of the process, leaving no room for oversight.

Executive Council approves childcare funding

CHILDCARE FROM A1

Hampshire to provide tuition assistance to childcare center staff to take courses working towards professional qualifications focused on early childhood education and care.

And as many centers shutter after struggling to pay and retain staff, those attempting to open a new facility often face similar issues.

The Boys and Girls Club's expansion in Warner knows this all too well.

In September, Charlie Albano, the chair of the town's Economic Development Advisory Committee contacted the

Boys and Girls Club about opening a new early childhood center to fill a vacancy in town left by the closure of Early Head Start.

With pay set at \$18 an hour, including full benefits and free childcare, Albano hoped to open the center in October.

But the opening day came months later in May, after staffing struggles delayed the new facility.

Now, two employees are running the center, currently caring for five toddlers, despite a capacity for 20 children - 12 toddlers and 8 infants.

And often this care comes at a high cost. In Warner, fami-

lies pay \$275 per week for toddlers, with the price of infant care slightly higher at \$300.

State-wide the average cost to care for toddlers sat at \$12,496 from 2020-21. This is 31% of a single mother's median income in New Hampshire, according to New Futures, a statewide advocacy group.

The Boys and Girls Club of Central New Hampshire, which is in Concord and supports the Warner facility, will see an additional \$1.25 million in funding thanks to an approved contract to prove childcare beyond school hours through June 30, 2025.

The Executive Council also approved funds to provide childcare scholarships through Family Resource Centers across the state. Over \$2 million will go to efforts to expand marketing for these programs, which offer assistance for families who are enrolled in the Financial Assistance to Needy Families program or has a gross monthly income at or below 220% of the federal poverty guidelines.

Since March of 2020, the Department of Health and Human Services has used federal relief funding from the pandemic to invest \$113 million into childcare statewide.

Merrimack Valley sees shake-up in leadership

MERRIMACK VALLEY FROM A1

and was not available for comment, according to Wormald.

This marks the second time recently that the Merrimack Valley School District has undergone a major change at the top after Wormald replaced outgoing Superintendent Mark MacLean, who announced his resignation in May of 2022 and whose contract expired this year.

Wormald signed a three-year contract and worked simultaneously with MacLean through the 2022-2023 school

year to prepare for his new position. He's been named the top teacher in the Granite State and in the entire country as well.

Meanwhile, Miller was the school board's unanimous choice for Merrimack Valley High School principal, replacing Michael Jette in 2014. Miller had been the assistant principal at Kearsarge Regional High School before landing in Penacook.

He came to MV followed by high marks for his career.

"I think most impressive to me was what I heard from a variety of people and teachers

who knew him," MVHS Assistant Superintendent Chris Barry said at the time, referring to Miller. "We heard about

his relationship building and the fact that he is a very collaborative person and a good listener."

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