



Richmond Community Alliance
Encouraging constructive community engagement and action

NEWSLETTER

No. 7 December 17, 2023

Peaks

“Those who stay, will be champions”

Economic Development Commission (EDC) members David Woodmansee and Peter Burton refused to abandon their commitment to the town, while four other members of the EDC decided to resign rather than attend a workshop with the Town Council on December 19, 2023. Peter further distinguished himself when he refused to be intimidated as he was verbally attacked by Councilor Colasante after the meeting had ended.

Seasons Greetings

Happy Hanukkah to those who celebrated last week. Merry Christmas and Happy Kwanzaa to those who will be celebrating next weekend. This is our last newsletter for 2023, so RCA wishes all a happy and prosperous New Year!

Valleys

Councilor Michael Colasante under Second Ethics Investigation

On December 12, 2023 the Rhode Island Ethics Commission voted 7–0, in executive session, to open another ethics investigation into Town Councilor Michael Colasante. The vote to open the investigation is no indication of guilt or innocence. The complaint was filed by fellow Councilor Rich Nassaney. The complaint alleges that Colasante has a business relationship with D’Ambra Construction and Richmond Sand & Stone because they did work at Colasante’s business, Buttonwoods Sawmill, and that Colasante violated the ethics law when he made motions and voted to award town road paving contracts to D’Ambra Construction. According to the complaint, the sole owner of Richmond Sand & Stone, LLC is Michael V. D’Ambra who is also Executive Vice President of D’Ambra Construction Company Inc.

Here is a chronological order of events set forth in the complaint. On September 6, 2023 Colasante made a motion and voted “yes” to award D’Ambra Construction the contract to pave

North Road. On September 8, a Richmond Sand & Stone truck and D'Ambra equipment are pictured working at Colasante's sawmill. Then on October 13, Richmond Sand & Stone is pictured delivering more material to Colasante's sawmill with a D'Ambra Construction grader working on the property. Following this, at the October 17 Richmond Town Council meeting, Colasante made the motion to award the paving of Tug Hollow Road to D'Ambra Construction and voted yes to award the contract.

The complaint includes documents showing Colasante's ownership of the sawmill, its location, and building layout. Also, there are RI Secretary of State documents showing that Richmond Sand & Stone, LLC has the same Registered Agent and the same principal office address as D'Ambra Construction Company, Inc.

Colasante submitted a response to the ethics commission regarding these allegations. In it he admits that he owns the sawmill and has purchased material from Richmond Sand & Stone. Colasante goes on to state "Richmond Sand and Stone is not owned by 'D'Ambra Construction'. I have never utilized D'Ambra Construction."

The Ethics Commission has 180 days to conduct an investigation. This instance makes three open ethics investigations involving elected officials in Richmond. Nell Carpenter filed an ethics complaint against Councilor Nassaney regarding his hot sauce and ongoing business relationship with Pasquale Farms. Council President Mark Trimmer filed an ethics complaint against Colasante regarding his ongoing business relationship with the town electrical inspector.

Other Items of Note

Genesis of Chariho Capital Improvement Plan

Recently you may have heard about discussions by the Chariho School Committee regarding a capital improvement plan that may include the construction of three new elementary schools to replace the four existing schools. In order to fully understand the current discussion it is necessary to review the groundwork that has been done to get the School Committee to this point. In the spring, the School Committee surveyed residents about their impression of the condition of the current elementary schools and what residents felt were the most important priorities for the future capital plans. In June, there were community walk-throughs of each elementary school. In the fall, the Necessity for School Construction Committee (established by the School Committee) began meeting to review this information to begin stage one of the process of submitting a capital improvement plan to the R.I. Department of Education (RIDE). All school departments are required by law to submit a capital improvement plan to RIDE.

Stage one involves identifying the needs of the elementary buildings. A quick snapshot for each:

- Hope Valley – 88 yrs old with 300 students (includes pre-K) – Three floors with no elevator. If a student can't use the stairs due to disability or injury, their entire class moves to the library. One faculty bathroom is in the boiler room. One kindergarten class separated from the others, so students need to walk through PE class or lunch to get to other areas of the building.
- Ashaway – 56 yrs old with 200 students – One single toilet (kid's size) bathroom for all faculty. Classrooms have only two electrical outlets – one for window AC & one for smart board. Lift to the 2nd floor is old, so it's hard to get parts when it breaks down.
- Richmond – 88 yrs old with 375 students – Water leaks in some classrooms. Two electrical outlets in each classroom and aging smart boards. Windows are difficult to open. Old cracked flooring and bathroom fixtures.
- Charlestown – 73 yrs old with 250 students – Issues with the electrical system when AC units are running. Bathroom fixtures breaking down. Furniture needs to be replaced. New roof needed within five years. Well/water issues.

For Chariho to simply maintain/repair its buildings without any upgrades (referred to as warm, safe & dry), it will cost \$30 million over the next 5 years. For that type of plan the state would fund 60% of the cost, but Chariho would need to continue to use the repaired buildings for the 20-year term of the bond. If Chariho built 3 new elementary schools, state reimbursement for that type of project could reach 81% if certain criteria are met. So if the cost was \$150 million, the state would pay \$120 million and the taxpayers in Chariho would pay \$30 million spread over 20 years.

Figures for the new school construction have not been provided yet. The School Committee will be reviewing those figures in January and February to decide what path makes the most sense for the future of Chariho. Should they fix the existing buildings at a lower cost, and keep using 75–90 year old buildings that will continue to need work, or should Chariho build three new schools that would cost more but with the increased state reimbursement. Using the example above, taxpayers would pay \$12 million to fix and keep the existing buildings for another 20 years, or pay \$30 million for three new schools with lower maintenance costs.

The School Committee must submit a plan to RIDE by the end of February, so it's important for residents to stay informed about upcoming school committee meetings in January and February when the decision on a plan will be made. Once the plan is submitted to RIDE, in April voters will have to approve the bond to borrow the funds for the plan selected by the school committee (warm, safe & dry OR new construction).

Here is Chariho's flier on this process with full details:

http://track.spe.schoolmessenger.com/f/a/ym5b0RQ00_cd1ganH5LSDw~~

Questions can be submitted to Chariho using this form:

<http://track.spe.schoolmessenger.com/f/a/72dtwNzNHkKtkBzLZmDnxg~/>

If you want to let Richmond's School Committee members know how you feel about these options, they are Kathryn Colasante (kathryn.colasante@chariho.k12.ri.us), Patricia Pouliot (patricia.pouliot@chariho.k12.ri.us), Jessica Purcell (jessica.purcell@chariho.k12.ri.us), and Karen Reynolds (karen.reynolds@chariho.k12.ri.us).

Planning Board Update

At the December 12th meeting, the Planning Board completed drafts of the Zoning Ordinances to adhere to legislative changes to the Zoning Enabling Legislation that was passed in 2023. The Planning Board requested that the Town Planner send a memo to the Town Council to schedule a workshop with the Planning Board to discuss the changes at the January 16, 2024 Town Council meeting. The most impactful change to the zoning ordinance is the review procedure for minor land development projects. The changes put more responsibility on one person, the Town Planner, reducing public involvement and oversight.

The legislation led to modifications to the definition of three types of development projects and the responsibilities of town entities:

- Pre-application review of the development application only applies to developments that require Planning Board review
- Planning Board appeals now go straight to a special Land Use court within the RI Superior Court instead of the Zoning Board
- Unified Development Review
 - Allows the Planning Board to approve variances and special use permits that are requested concurrently with an application for approval of a development plan or land development project; previously, all variances and special use permits were decided by the Zoning Board
- Technical Review Committee (TRC)
 - The Technical Review Committee is a committee of town officials, town employees, and town consultants with the authority to approve, or to review and make non-binding recommendations to the Planning Board
 - The TRC consists of the Town Planner, DPW Director, Zoning Officer, one Planning Board Member, one Conservation Committee Member, Water System Manager, Fire Chief of the district in which the application is within, and Professional Engineering Consultant
- Development Plan Review

- Site plan review of a development that is only for uses that do not require a variance, a special use permit, subdivision approval, or land development project approval
- Development plan review is generally reviewed and approved by the Town Planner but can be referred to the Technical Review Committee; this was a Planning Board responsibility with public oversight
- Minor Land Development Project
 - Non-residential construction of no more than 7,500 square feet of gross floor area of all structures
 - Enlargement of a non-residential building that increases the gross floor area by no more than 50% or by 10,000 square feet of gross floor area, whichever is less
 - A mixed-use development consisting of 6 or less dwelling units and 2,500 square feet of gross floor area for commercial use
 - A residential development that creates 9 or fewer new principal dwelling units
 - Redevelopment or reconstruction to change the use of a multi-family residential, commercial, or industrial building that does not propose significant exterior alteration of the site
 - Adaptive reuse with a total of no more than 25,000 square feet of gross floor area in a non-residential zoning district that does not require extensive exterior construction or extensive exterior site redevelopment
 - Adaptive reuse in a residential zoning district that creates 8 or fewer new dwelling units
 - Minor Land Development projects are generally reviewed and approved by the Town Planner but can be referred to the Technical Review Committee; this was a Planning Board responsibility with public oversight
 - If a street is created or extended or Unified Development Review is required, it is reviewed and approved by the Planning Board
- Major Land Development Project
 - Anything outside the bounds of a Minor Land Development project
 - The Town Planner and Technical Review Committee review the master plan and preliminary plans prior to the Planning Board
 - The master plan is reviewed by the Planning Board during a public hearing where public comment is permitted

The legislation also changed the definition of accessory dwelling units and defined the requirements for “Adaptive Reuse”:

- Accessory dwelling units
 - Located in the same structure or on the same lot as a principal dwelling unit (one or multi-family dwelling)

- A two-family dwelling may have one accessory dwelling unit that is accessory to the larger of the two dwelling units
- The accessory dwelling unit must be owned by the same person who owns the principal dwelling; either the accessory dwelling unit or the principal dwelling unit must be occupied by the owner of the property
- The gross floor area of the accessory dwelling unit shall be no more than 50% or a maximum of 800 sq ft of the gross floor area of the principal dwelling, whichever is greater
- Adaptive reuse involves converting a non-residential building to a multi-unit residential or mixed-use building; 50% of the building must be converted to dwelling units; dwelling unit density may exceed the underlying zoning

Three other policy changes that are meant to meet the goals and policies of the Comprehensive Plan and increase types of affordable housing available include:

- Low-to-Moderate Income (LMI) designated housing deed restriction reduced from 99 years to 30 years
- Changes to use code definitions of mobile and manufactured homes and where both are permitted:
 - Mobile homes and mobile home parks will no longer be permitted in Richmond
 - Manufactured homes will be considered no different than single family units
- Two family dwelling units will be considered no different than single family units

Town Hall Holiday Closures

Friday, December 22 – closing at Noon

Monday, December 25 – closed

Monday, January 1 – closed

Upcoming Meetings

December 19 – Town Council Meeting – 6 pm at Town Hall

January 2 - Town Council Meeting – 6 pm at Town Hall

Agendas can be found at <https://clerkshq.com/richmond-ri>

Announcement

RCA will be having a “Friend–Raising” event January 25, 2024 – details TBA. Community members will be able to speak with our steering committee members, learn about our future, and share comments or concerns.

Future Ideas

We would like to spotlight local businesses, people, and points of interest in our area in future newsletters. If you have an idea for a person/place to feature, or an event to include on the community calendar, feel free to email us at rca4richmond@gmail.com. We also welcome any tips or items of concern that you wish to bring to our attention.