



Cut & paste

No, not with a mouse. College students have collected a century of scrapbooks. See Arts + Leisure.



Ice time

Both Tiger hockey teams hosted tough opponents on Feb. 14. See how they fared on Page 1B.



Down the road

The food business Gilfeathers will move into a bigger space in Ferrisburgh. See Page 2A.

ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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A born entertainer

MIDDLEBURY FIGURE SKATING Club member Marigold Prentice glides through a number called “Love Story” during the Winter Carnival Ice Show on Sunday. See more photos on Pages 4A & 10A. Independent photo/Steve James

Prosecutor draws scrutiny

Victims, advocates cite Vekos for mistakes, poor treatment

Part 1 of 2

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — As she prepares to defend herself against a DUI charge this spring, Addison County State’s Attorney Eva Vekos is touting a major rebound in her office.

In a recent press release, she specifically pointed to the hiring of a new deputy prosecutor, attorney Kai Hardy, and major advances in casework since she started the job. The county prosecutor’s office has shrunk, from 44.29% to 14.32%, its backlog of cases; reduced by 8% the volume of criminal cases, and seen a 70% decline in the number of pending criminal cases awaiting prosecution.

“Since March 2023 and today, our office has averaged a clearance rate of 112% per month,” Vekos stated in the release. “This means that for every new case that is brought to court, 1.12 cases are resolved (closed).”



EVA VEKOS

But not everyone is crowing about her accomplishments.

Numerous victims in criminal cases prosecuted by Vekos — particularly survivors of domestic and sexual assault cases — told the *Independent* they were dissatisfied with the way their cases were handled by the county’s top

prosecutor.

The *Independent* interviewed five victims and/or family members of victims associated with cases handled by Vekos. Those interviewed claimed that since she took office more than two years ago, Vekos has been late for court proceedings, unprepared for court business, at times addressed victims in a condescending manner, and seemed preoccupied with clearing the caseload at the expense of what they believed should be a harsher punishment for the defendant.

In addition to interviewing Vekos and several of those whose cases she handled, the *Independent* spoke with local victims’ advocates, lawmakers and officials involved in county courthouse proceedings. They shared their observations and, in some cases, correspondence between themselves and Vekos that they said demonstrates a level of (See Vekos, Page 12A)

Scott’s plan targets Vt.’s career centers

Hannaford chief predicts major impacts

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — Vermont Agency of Education officials and Gov. Phil Scott are touting a revamp of the state’s Career Technical Education (CTE) system that they believe will improve the quality and efficiency of the state’s 17 CTE hubs — including Addison County’s Patricia Hannaford Career Center (PHCC).

But Nicole MacTavish, PHCC superintendent, has a far different point of view.

“The details of his proposal ... would unfortunately do the opposite, resulting in significantly diminished CTE opportunities for Vermont students,” she wrote in a Feb. 11 email to leaders of the Addison County Chamber (See Career Ctr., Page 13A)

Three vie for MAUSD board seats in Bristol

By MARIN HOWELL

BRISTOL — Bristol’s Town Meeting Day ballot on March 4 will feature a three-person race for two seats representing the town on the Mount Abraham Unified School District Board.

Elizabeth Sayre, Meredith Rossignol and Chanin Hill are running for the two available three-year terms. Rossignol and Sayre

currently serve on the panel.

The *Independent* reached out to the three candidates to hear more about their candidacy, experience and thoughts on key issues and changes to the state’s education funding system.

Their answers are printed below. Responses from Sayre were not available as the *Independent* went (See Bristol, Page 18A)



Parenting on the fly

ERIN WOLCOTT MAKES the most of Sunday’s snow by pulling her 2-year-old daughter, Angie Mae Spencer, while skiing down South Maple Street in Vergennes.

Photo by Chris Spencer



By the way
Bristol residents are invited to a Tuesday, Feb. 25, forum at Holley Hall titled, “Bristol Town Forum: Federal Policy and (See By the way, Page 18A)

Eight seek spots on selectboard in Monkton

By MARIN HOWELL

MONKTON — Highlighting Town Meeting Day voting in Monkton are races for three seats on the town’s selectboard, which have opened up after a few longtime members decided to step down from their posts.

Eight candidates have stepped up to run for the spots. Those on the March 4 ballot are:

- Sam Peisch, lone candidate for the one year remaining on a three-year seat.
 - Matthew Huizenga, Anthony Delgreco, John Dunham and Randall Charboneau, for a two-year term.
 - Tom Steadman, Jessica Demeritt and Scott L. Gordon, for an open three-year seat.
- (See Monkton, Page 17A)

\$49.5M sewer plant vote is coming

Midd officials say current facility needs makeover

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — You flush your toilet, you move on, right?

Well, people whose sewage ends up at Middlebury’s wastewater treatment plant are about to get a vivid reminder that there’s a lot more to removing waste than flushing.

Shire town residents on March 4 will be asked to endorse a \$49,580,000 makeover of that plant, which has already outlived its intended 20-year lifespan by almost five years.

For more than two decades, Middlebury’s wastewater treatment plant has kept a low profile — both literally and figuratively.

Tucked away in a vale at the periphery of Middlebury’s industrial park off Exchange Street, the plant is both nowhere and everywhere; seemingly invisible, yet steadfastly linked to (See Sewer plant, Page 16A)



MIDDLEBURY WASTEWATER TREATMENT plant Superintendent Jeremy Rathbun points to a series of circuit breakers that ensure the facility stays powered up. The breakers are now antiquated, and it can take around four months for a replacement to come in.

Independent photo/Steve James

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Vekos

(Continued from Page 1A)
unprofessionalism and curtness they'd never seen under prior state's attorneys.

Vekos was offered opportunities to defend herself, both during an in-person interview and through a series of emailed questions.

"I don't think it would be appropriate to engage in a public debate with unidentified sources about specific cases," she said. "However, I would welcome the opportunity to meet with anyone involved in a case that I have prosecuted to have a constructive discussion. I stand by the record of my work in the hundreds of cases I've handled in over 27 years of legal practice, including the cases of the Addison County SA's office."

Those interviewed by the *Independent* alleged, among other things, that:

- About 10 victims in 2024 chose to hire attorneys to help ensure their rights as victims were being upheld. While advocates told the *Independent* that the extent of victims "lawyering up" as "unprecedented" in Addison County's criminal division, Vekos said, "I don't see it as interference; I find it very helpful."

- In September of 2023, members of the county's domestic violence/sexual assault team requested a meeting with Vekos because she was allegedly not responding to official case updates. Vekos, according to two people at that meeting, walked out mid-meeting while raising her voice. A month later, Vekos agreed to monthly "community partner" meetings to review sex assault and domestic violence cases, but subsequently cancelled and no longer participates, according to

regular attendees.

"There came a time when I felt the meetings themselves weren't productive," Vekos said. "The idea was the group wanted to be regularly updated on the status (of cases). I felt the updates are just as easily done by emails and reports I've developed."

But at least one member of the team contends she was temporarily denied access to that information.

Vekos has had such a fractured relationship with victims' advocate Martha Bowdish that she at one point during 2023 cut off Bowdish's access to Justware, a software program through which SA employees can access case information.

"You are not an employee of this department and I cannot imagine a scenario where a non-employee would have full access to the state's files, videos, calendars, etc.," Vekos informed Bowdish through a Nov. 17, 2023, email.

"I'm not cutting you out or denying you any information," she stated. "Relax. Please. This conversation is over."

The Vermont Department of State's Attorneys & Sheriffs quickly restored Bowdish's access.

Unlike Katie Dutton — a victims' advocate funded through and assigned to the SA's office — Bowdish is employed by the Addison County Unit for Special Investigations, which helps the SA's office investigate sexual assault and domestic violence cases. The State's Attorney and Sheriff's office covers the annual cost of Bowdish's work, without which Vekos and her staff would need look after victims' concerns in hundreds of additional juvenile and criminal cases.

And in addition to being temporarily kicked off Justware, Vekos last April asked the Vermont Department of Buildings & General Services to deactivate the badge that allows Bowdish access to the SA's office. This happened just days before a trial in the longstanding case of Rein Kolts, who was accused in 2014 of repeatedly sexually assaulting a girl over a two-year period, beginning when she was 11. Bowdish had been working with victims in the case.

Annie Noonan, labor relations and operations director for the Vermont Department of State's Attorneys & Sheriffs, denied Vekos's request.

"(Bowdish) cannot perform her work (on the Kolts trial) without being able to be in the office to communicate and collaborate with you and the other staff," reads Noonan's letter denying the deactivation of Bowdish's badge.

"It seems reasonable to expect that whatever issues or problems may exist in the relationship between you and Martha, the victims in cases being handled by the Addison County SA's Office, and by Martha on our behalf, should not suffer as a result; and that you will make every effort to proceed professionally and collegially with Martha for the benefit of the victims in the Addison County SA's Office cases."

In an email, Vekos cited the Kolts case as a win for her office, but also an example where the survivors won't be happy with the sentence handed down to the defendant.

"In February of 2024, I tried a serial child rapist who was found guilty of two counts of sexual abuse of a child under the age of 13. This defendant now faces the possibility of 10 years to life on each count. He will likely never admit to his crimes, and I will advocate that he spend the rest of his life in prison. But for this victim and her family, life in prison is probably not punishment enough."



ADDISON COUNTY STATE'S Attorney Eva Vekos appeared to be ready for the job when she was formally sworn in by Vermont Judge David Fenster in early 2023. But some victims and victims' advocates, as well as others in the judicial community, have not been pleased with her performance.
Independent file photo/Steve James

TOO LATE TO CALL EXPERT

But victims' advocates alleged that Vekos was unable to get an expert witness to testify on the state's behalf because of her own tardiness in advancing that witness, Abby Tassel, a trauma-informed sexual assault investigation and adjudication educational program instructor.

With the case set for trial on May 1, 2024, Vekos's office filed a notice on March 21 that it intended to call Tassel. Kolts's attorneys filed a motion to exclude Tassel from testifying because the late disclosure date wouldn't give defense the time to retain and prepare its own expert witness.

Vermont Superior Court Judge Michael S. Kupersmith agreed with the defense in an April 17 ruling.

"The time for the state to disclose the expert witness was prior to Sept. 15, 2023. The state even had a second chance to retain and disclose its expert when the trial was postponed on Oct. 26, 2023. Here, disclosure of the state's witness was simply too late," he wrote in his decision.

The *Independent* reached out to Bowdish for comment. She provided the following statement:

"I applaud the bravery of these survivors for their courage to talk about their experiences with the criminal justice system and specifically SA Vekos. I have observed the injustices survivors

have endured at the hands of SA Vekos and I stand with the survivors. Victims of domestic and sexual violence matter. Despite SA Vekos' lack of aggressive prosecution of domestic and sexual

violence cases, there is a team of dedicated professionals that are here to support and advocate for you."

Also among the complaints against Vekos that the *Independent* heard were that:

- When former Deputy State's Attorney Anthony Bamrick gave his notice last summer, Vekos told him to get out and started throwing things, according to a witness to the alleged incident.

"I am also not going to comment on a private conversation that took place between myself and a member of my staff," Vekos said of the incident. "I was sorry to see Anthony go, but glad that he achieved his goal of going into private practice."

- On Nov. 4, 2024, Addison County Superior Court

Judge Robert Katims and court staff held a criminal law bench/bar meeting at which attorneys, court staff, county prosecutors and community partners met to discuss criminal law issues. Vekos, according to multiple witnesses, arrived late and, during discussion about the length of citation dates,

got upset and left the courtroom, allegedly yelling an epithet heard by the people in the courtroom. She returned near the end of the meeting, according to witnesses.

Vekos acknowledged being saddened, as opposed to angry, about at the incident in question.

- Vekos, according to testimonials gathered by some of those who have worked alongside her, doesn't react well when prosecutorial partners disagree with her. Sources noted, as an example, a Nov. 15, 2023, sentencing hearing at which Judge David Fenster — a former Addison County state's attorney, himself — heard a proposed plea deal for Andrew Hinman, now 23, a defendant who'd been charged with a felony sexual assault/no consent charge stemming from a Sept. 8, 2017, incident when he and the female victim were both 15.

The victim and her family said the proposed sentence was too lenient — a four-year deferred sentence (probation), with credit for time served. The jail time he'd already served was for violating conditions of release. Fenster rejected that plea deal.

The day after that hearing, Vekos sent an email message to two advocates who worked with victims in the Hinman case: Bowdish and Jena Santa Maria, director of advocacy for Atria Collective, formerly known as WomenSafe.

(See Prosecutor, Page 13A)

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Bristol police district budget set for vote

By MARIN HOWELL
BRISTOL — On Town Meeting Day, voters who live in the Bristol Police District (primarily the village) will consider a proposed fiscal year 2026 spending plan of \$688,370. The spending plan would require \$533,088 to be raised by taxes.
Voters will be asked to adopt the proposed police district budget by Australian ballot on March 4.
The budget reflects a spending increase of \$61,742, or 9.85%, from the current year. Town officials noted in the Bristol Town Report that the increase is “largely due to increases in compensation

and benefits to remain competitive in a challenging market, liability insurance and supply expenses.”
“While there is a projected increase in non-tax revenues by more than \$8,115 (5.51%), the net supported by taxes is proposed to be increased by \$53,627 (11.18%),” Bristol officials added.
Bristol town officials held an informational meeting on the proposed spending plan during a Feb. 10 selectboard meeting. An additional informational meeting will take place at the selectboard’s Feb. 24 meeting, which will be held on Zoom and in person at Holley Hall beginning at 6:30 p.m.

Prosecutor

(Continued from Page 12A)
“A colossal mistake,” Vekos wrote. “Whatever trust and partnership that existed between our offices is now in grave jeopardy. I look forward to seeing how you plan to repair it.”
Family and friends of the victim turned out at the Mahady Courthouse this past Monday, Feb. 10, to see Hinman agree to a plea deal that called for six years of probation, with conditions — including that he not contact the victim, engage in violent or threatening behavior and meet regularly with his probation officer.
Danielle Hill, the victim’s mom, said she was shocked that the plea deal didn’t include incarceration or the defendant’s placement on the state’s sex offender registry.

agreements she’s navigating, especially around the frustration — and quite frankly, ire — that I’ve heard from some of the victims’ families. I hope the (state’s Professional Conduct Board), housed within our judiciary, is taking the complaints that are being filed against SA Vekos with utmost seriousness.”

“As a rule, parties are usually dissatisfied with criminal court outcomes. Our system of justice simply does not have the tools to make victims truly whole or take away their pain.”

— Eva Vekos

Vekos defended her performance on behalf of the state and victims:
“As prosecutor, I try to strike a balance — as justice requires — to meet the needs of victims and the community. I do this with careful thought, deliberation and creativity. Unfortunately, we cannot always control the outcome of a criminal matter and there are times when others may disagree with my approach to a particular case. As a rule, parties are usually dissatisfied with criminal court outcomes. Our system of justice simply does not have the tools to make victims truly whole or take away their pain. The best it can hope to do is work toward accountability, rehabilitation, restitution and, yes, even punishment where warranted. This is my goal in every case.”

“From the time she took over this case, we always felt there were two defense counsels in the room, not a prosecutor.”

— Danielle Hill

The *Independent* reached out to Atria Collective officials for comment. In the last three months of 2024, Atria served 218 new victim/survivors, 88 of whom received legal assistance. Specific services included help obtaining restraining orders, no-stalking orders, civil legal assistance with family law issues, and immigration assistance.
The Atria board provided a statement, which in part reads:
“For the past two years, Atria Collective has

observed the tenure of Eva Vekos as Addison County State’s Attorney, a critical and influential position that significantly impacts the lives of victims and survivors in our community. Unfortunately, during her time in office, Atria Collective has witnessed countless instances where the statutory rights of victims and survivors have been violated, along with a consistent and troubling disregard for their respect and dignity — behaviors that no one, especially victims and survivors, should have to endure. In case after case, our agency has observed State’s Attorney Vekos neglecting to prioritize both the safety of victims and survivors and the well-being of the community. Victims and survivors deserve security and justice.

“Atria Collective continues to be dedicated to supporting victims and survivors throughout the criminal justice continuum,” the statement continues. “It is our sincere hope that State’s Attorney Vekos reflects on and acknowledges the harm caused by her practices and dedicates herself to learning and growth in her role as well as opportunities for repair. To the victims and survivors of Addison County: we see you, we hear you, you are valid, you are enough, and we continue to stand with you — today and every day.”
Editor’s note: In Part 2 next week we will look at victim testimonials.

Career center

(Continued from Page 1A)
of Commerce and the Addison County Economic Development Corp. — two entities that partner with the Career Center on student programming.

MacTavish and her counterparts are monitoring, with trepidation, the Scott administration’s effort to transform the delivery of CTE as part of a broader Transformative Education Plan that his administration unfurled last month. That plan includes consolidating the state’s current 171 public school entities into five regional districts, each one governed by a single school board and superintendent. Addison County would be grouped with Chittenden and Franklin Counties — an area with 34,104 preK-12 students.

The plan — which would come with a new formula for school funding — would vest major funding and policy decisions in the AOE and regional boards, though it recommends a “school advisory council” for each public school, comprised of school educators, staff, students and caregivers to influence school improvement plans, budgeting and the district’s strategic plan.

While the governor’s proposed preK-12 public education changes have garnered a lot of headlines, less has been said about how his revamp blueprint would affect CTE. It remains to be seen how much of the Republican governor’s plan will advance in the Democrat-majority Legislature, but his current plan — which borrows from a study of Vermont’s current CTE system by the consulting firm of Augenblick, Palaich and Associates calls for:

- All the state’s CTE centers and programming to be overseen by a single, statewide CTE Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES).
 - The state to directly fund the new CTE BOCES directly for all center-based career/technical students. The proposed funding amount for each CTE Full Time Equivalent (FTE) students is projected to be \$25,000.
 - The CTE BOCES would be expected to fund all operations from the \$25,000 per FTE student (part-timers are added together to create fulltime equivalents), including building budgets for each of the public CTE centers.
- “APA has found that median spending for CTE programs is around \$25,000 per student to provide a full-time program, not including any costs still incurred by sending districts to support students at their sending school,” reads a summary of the governor’s education plan.
MacTavish believes having all 17 CTEs managed by a statewide career/tech board would curtail individual career centers’ ability to design and implement their educational programming in a manner that will prepare graduates for the sometimes unique needs of the local industries that are hiring.

“Centralizing CTE oversight to cut costs is antithetical to what Vermont needs to grow our own labor force, to boost industry, and to respond to the needs of local economy,” she said.

Relying on a single Vermont career/tech board to plot a statewide CTE strategy fails to recognize different counties



NICOLE MACTAVISH

have different business niches and needs, MacTavish noted.

“In order to expand economic opportunity and strengthen industry, we must grow our own highly skilled tradespeople,” she said. “The smart people who originally designed CTE in Vermont knew this, and they designed a system specifically to strengthen Vermont, through county-based CTE centers.”

The Middlebury-based PHCC receives students from the Addison Central, Addison Northwest and Mount Abraham school districts. The center delivers 19 career/technical education programs to the more than 300 students who take one or more classes at the center’s Charles Avenue or North Campus facilities in Middlebury. Adding up all the part-timers, the PHCC now serves the equivalent of 150 fulltime students.

County voters on March 4 will field a proposed PHCC fiscal year 2026 spending plan of \$5,704,280, representing an 8% increase compared to this year. Career center officials have said the increase is largely driven by 9% increase in negotiated teacher salaries for next year, a 12% bump in health insurance premiums, and debt service for \$8.1 million in

renovations recently made to both PHCC’s Middlebury campuses.
MacTavish, at a recent Addison Central School District board meeting, noted the PHCC is one of four CTE centers that are independent school districts. Those four independent CTE districts generally have higher tuitions than the 13 other, non-independent centers.

“We have higher tuitions because we don’t just provide the programming; we do all the office tasks, too,” she said, citing accounting, human resources, budgeting and other functions. Hannaford is now the only CTE center statewide to run a theater program, which this year marks its 30th birthday.

In large part due to its independent status and diverse programming, the PHCC is proposing an FY26 tuition rate if \$34,920. That’s almost \$10,000 per FTE student more than the CTE tuition rate of \$25,000 that’s being pitched through the Scott plan.

Debt service on the recent \$8.1 million renovation amounts to more than 14% of the PHCC’s budget ask. And MacTavish noted Scott’s proposal doesn’t take into consideration state aid for school construction.

“(This) would mean we would also somehow have to fund this (construction) debt, from less than half our current budget,” MacTavish said.

The PHCC would have no choice but to trim its offerings, which ironically would translate into fewer students and thus a smaller revenue stream.

“Budget cuts of this magnitude would force us to cut programs like agriculture, diesel technology, construction, and medical professions,” she said, adding, “Given the scope of staffing cuts, we would no longer have the capacity to secure, administer, and complete the numerous reporting

requirements for large complex federal, state, and industry grants. This loss of capacity would cost us upwards of \$500,000 per year in revenue.”

Another lamentable casualty, according to MacTavish, would be the PHCC’s Adult Education programs, which serves hundreds of Addison County residents each year.

“These adult education programs are an unfunded mandate. We are currently able to subsidize (them) through our other funding streams, but in the scenario outlined in the governor’s proposal, we would no longer be able to support adult education.”

Also concerning to MacTavish: A proposed 18-month timetable for transitioning to the new CTE system.

There’s bipartisan momentum in Montpelier right now toward transforming Vermont’s public education system, which has been shedding students at an alarming rate as expenses keep going up. Lawmakers have yet to coalesce around a leading plan at this point.

MacTavish hopes the plan ultimately chosen will preserve at least some of the local backbone of CTE.

“One of the reasons I chose to bring my family here is the strong school system and the way CTE is set up,” she said. “The system we currently have is set up to drive strong economic development in Vermont. The founders — whoever those smart people were — designed the current system on a county-ish basis, so our CTE centers could be responding to the local economic drivers, what kind of workforce was needed, what the industries were, and how we train high-skilled, high-in-demand, high-wage jobs, so our kids can move into these industries and hopefully stay in Vermont.”

Reporter John Flowers is at johnf@addisonindependent.com

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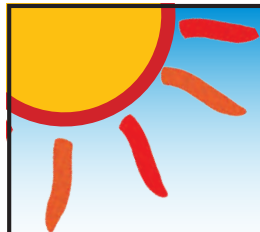
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Doing it all

One actor plays nine roles in “The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey” at THT. See Arts + Leisure.



Playoff victory

It took late drama, but the Tiger boys advanced in the Division II postseason. See Sports, Page 1B.



Parks & Rec

Learn about programs, athletics and special events March to May in Middlebury.

ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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\$1.50

Crime victims share their stories

Top prosecutor draws criticism for alleged oversights and plea deals

Part 2 of 2.
By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — Addison County State’s Attorney Eva Vekos has been working hard to clear up a backlog of cases, and she provided statistics showing some success in efforts to winnow down those cases.

But several victims/survivors of criminal cases she has prosecuted said they’re angry about the manner and pace in which their cases have been handled by the county’s top prosecutor.

Middlebury’s Abby Morsman was 16 when she went to a June 2022 party at a peer’s house that included several of her friends.

She left the party a changed

“I won’t go down to a lesser charge just to have her get done with (the case). I deserve justice, too.”

— Roberta, a crime victim

person, after an alleged sexual assault that she said has left her distraught and estranged from a former circle of friends — so much so that she withdrew from Middlebury Union High School

to attend private school. Holidays in Middlebury are now mostly spent inside her family’s house, where there’s less risk of accidentally bumping into people, including the alleged perpetrator, a sight that might trigger bad memories.

Bad memories and a closing chapter that’s yet to be written through the legal

process.

Morsman — who asked that her full name be used in this article — acknowledged that it

(See Vekos, Page 18A)



STATE’S ATTORNEY EVA Vekos talks with the Middlebury selectboard in 2023.

Trump moves cast doubt on city project

Opera house officials still hopeful

By ANDY KIRKALDY

VERGENNES — The chaos sown by the Trump administration and its Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) has created uncertainty for many national, state and local institutions and their plans — a list that includes key financing for the Vergennes Opera House’s All Access Project.

Here’s the background: That long-planned project, estimated at \$1.9 million and now scheduled to break ground late this spring, will upgrade public access to the second-story theater in Vergennes City Hall and at the same time establish for the first time true ground-level handicap access to city offices on the first floor.

The centerpiece of those plans is

an elevator tower to be built at the end of the alley that runs between city hall’s west side and St. Paul’s Episcopal Church.

The other major element of the All Access Project is creating full ADA-compliant internal access from the theater’s dressing room to the stage and theater levels, and also from the driveway on the building’s east side to the dressing room. Also included is an ADA-compliant rest room in the dressing room.

What’s the major potential hitch? Its federal funding could be in jeopardy.

In October the volunteer Friends of the Vergennes Opera House (FVOH) organization

(See Opera house, Page 16A)

Read our town meeting previews on Pages 9A-15A

Lawmakers talk ed funding at Bristol forum

By JOHN FLOWERS

BRISTOL — Efforts to streamline Vermont’s public education system, a potential loss of federal funding for state programs and the ongoing, unbridled rise in health insurance premiums dominated discussion at Monday’s legislative breakfast hosted by Bristol American Legion Post 19.

The event — sponsored by the Addison County Farm Bureau and the Bridport Grange — drew a crowd of around 50 people, including five members of the county’s legislative delegation. Attendance — both by lawmakers and constituents — has been on the rise this year, a reflection of the interest and angst generated by recent state and national events.

Here in the Green Mountain State, Gov. Phil Scott is pitching what he’s calling his “Education Transformation Plan,” which calls

(See Breakfast, Page 8A)



By the way

The Addison County Solid Waste Management District is seeking general volunteers, and volunteer “fixers,” for its next Repair Fair, slated from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on April 5 at American Legion Post 27, 49 Wilson Road, Middlebury. The Repair Fair is a free, family-friendly

(See By the way, Page 16A)

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MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE STUDENTS and community members gather outside the McCullough Student Center this past Thursday for a Big Trans Dance Party. The event was organized in response to what some described as an “anti-trans” talk inside Wilson Hall that evening and preceded an alternative forum on trans healthcare and politics organized by students.

Independent photo/Steve James

Students turn out for their trans peers

Scores gather for panel, party

By MARIN HOWELL

MIDDLEBURY — Multiple executive orders signed by President Donald Trump in the weeks since he took office have targeted transgender people, from the healthcare they’re able to access to the sports they’re allowed to compete in.

How have such actions at the federal level affected trans community members in Addison County?

Middlebury College junior Lia Smith, a trans woman who competed as diver for Middlebury’s aquatics team, has seen a change over her career in sports.

“There’s been a shift, and as

(See Support, Page 17A)

Three newcomers aim for ACSD seats

Incumbents Orzech, Bauer part of contest

MIDDLEBURY — The *Independent* sent four education-related questions to each of the three, first-time candidates competing next week in a five-person race for three Middlebury seats on the Addison Central School District board:

Vance Bishop, Ron Makleff and Jess Venable-Novak.

Their answers appear below.

The *Independent* also urges ACSD voters in the district-member towns of Bridport, Cornwall, Middlebury, Ripton, Salisbury, Shoreham and Weybridge to re-read the Jan. 9 article (tinyurl.com/4hpu26e9) in which Brian Bauer and Steve Orzech — the two incumbents who round out the five-person field for the three seats — discuss their priorities, should

they win re-election.

Also on the March 4 ballot will be uncontested elections for Ripton’s lone seat on the ACSD board (Steve Cash), as well as Weybridge’s seat (Jamie McCallum).

The ACSD elections will be decided on Town Meeting Day, March 4.

Candidate responses were limited to 125 words per question.

• *Biographical details that make you well-suited to the ACSD board.*

Vance Bishop: I hold a bachelor’s degree in communication and a master’s in education. My teaching experience spans parochial, private, alternative, state, and charter schools, where I taught physical and special education.

(See ACSD, Page 16A)



MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY HEALTH CEO Heidi Melbostad was one of several representatives from local and state organizations to present at a community forum in Bristol on Tuesday, which centered around the local impact of federal funding cuts and other changes at the national level.

Photo by Howard Jennings

Locals voice concerns for federal funding

By MARIN HOWELL

BRISTOL — More than 100 people gathered in Bristol’s Holley Hall on Tuesday to hear from their neighbors and share concerns about the local impact of federal funding cuts and other changes at the national level executed by the Trump administration.

Attendees got a chance to hear from legislators, healthcare professionals, school officials and other representatives from area organizations. Many expressed trepidation and uncertainty about the ripple effect of various recent actions taken in Washington, D.C.

In the five weeks since President Donald Trump took office, his administration and the Department of Government Efficiency have pursued or proposed significant spending cuts across sectors that serve Americans in a variety of ways. On Tuesday, the U.S. House of Representatives narrowly approved a budget resolution endorsed by Trump that many fear will result in potential cuts to Medicaid.

(See Bristol, Page 3A)

Vekos

(Continued from Page 1A)
took her two years to muster the courage to tell her family about the incident and bring her complaint to local authorities.

Contributing to her silence, she recalled, was being told by a friend that her alleged assaulter could file a complaint against *her*, because he had allegedly been under the influence at the time. It was an assertion that, at age 16, she didn't think she could challenge.

Morsman said she was also intimidated by the logistics of filing a complaint and the reaction it might catalyze.

"It's an excruciating process, one that I knew I wanted to engage in for my own sake," she said. "But this is a small community and small town, which definitely compounds the discomfort of any process like this."

During her self-imposed silence, living with the incident took its toll.

She was hospitalized with an eating disorder during the fall of 2023, which Morsman ascribes at least in part to post-assault anxiety.

The tipping point for coming forward came after Morsman said she witnessed a pattern of sexual harassment at her new school.

She submitted to an interview with an Addison County Unit for Special Investigations official, who recommended prosecution as a sex assault/no consent case in criminal court.

Vekos eventually recommended a "deferred prosecution agreement (DPA)" for her alleged assaulter, a voluntary agreement between a prosecutor and a defendant to delay criminal charges in exchange for meeting certain conditions. Typically, if those conditions —

which might include such things as staying away from the victim, not consuming alcohol, and/or completing counseling within a certain period of time — are met, the charges are dropped.

Morsman rejected the idea of a DPA resolution to her case. She said she'd consider supporting an enforceable deferred sentencing process that would see the case go

through criminal court but allow the accused to have a clean record if they meet court-ordered conditions.

Vekos ultimately agreed to allow Morsman's case to be assigned to a different prosecutor, according to court documents.

Victim's advocates working with Morsman first checked in with the Vermont Attorney General's Office, which declined to take on the case, citing a substantial pending caseload. The AG's office instead suggested Morsman's representatives approach Franklin County Deputy State's Attorney Diane Wheeler, a seasoned sexual violence prosecutor.

Wheeler agreed to take the case, and on Sept. 20, 2024, informed Vekos of her availability, according to court documents.

Vekos, in a same-day email reply to Wheeler and copied to multiple court officials, replied, "Hold on folks. I never intended to allow this case to fall on the lap of another county prosecutor. The case will remain in Addison... I gave law enforcement an opportunity to go to the AGO — only."

Morsman has been frustrated by the pace and handling of her case since it was filed last spring.

"The power rests with (Vekos), and there's little anyone has been able to do to affect change in her disposition and manner of

executing the case," she said.

It's a case that has drawn interest, she said.

"In a small town, people like to say it takes a village to raise a child, but when the village abandons the child, that has massive impacts. In my view, people are watching."

The relative lack of action in the case thus far, she said, "is deeply injurious to me, and also to the community. It sets a precedent that when this happens, and when someone has the guts to speak up about it, nothing happens."

"It re-instills a lack of hope."

CHANGE IN SENTENCING

Morsman is not the only local crime victim to be upset with Vekos's performance as prosecutor.

Another young woman claims Vekos advanced a plea that she rejected and that could result in her assailant spending less time behind bars than she and her advocates had thought possible.

Tina is the victim in the state's case against 31-year-old Kyle Wilson, who was charged in October of 2023 with four misdemeanor counts of disclosing sexually explicit images without consent, and one count of "disturbing the peace by phone — hate crime," after having allegedly posted sexually explicit photos of the victim online in January 2022.

Wilson had previously been cited for felony second-degree aggravated domestic assault, felony interference with access to emergency services and felony unlawful restraint with risk of injury, all stemming from an alleged December 2021 incident involving the same survivor, according to court records.

Tina and her court representatives had lobbied for a sentence of 3–5 years in jail, less time served. They hoped Wilson would have access to counseling during his jail time.

Tina was also granted a 10-year relief from abuse order to keep Wilson away from her.

But at a courthouse sentencing hearing last November, there was



ADDISON COUNT PROSECUTOR Eva Vekos speaks with the press after a hearing in a murder case in November 2023.

Independent file photo/Marin Howell

confusion about the amount of prison time Wilson had already served and could therefore be deducted from his sentence.

Vekos had received information from the Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) that Wilson, at the time, had served around 845 days in jail, according to court records.

"The state (Vekos) communicated this fact to the defendant, which served to encourage him to enter into the plea deal. It was understood by the parties that the defendant was anticipated to serve a minimum of 399 days," reads a Nov. 6 motion to reconsider sentencing, filed by Wilson's attorney, Steven J. Howard.

But soon after the sentencing, Howard noted the DOC issued a new sentencing calculation that changed the time served calculation to 371 days, which would result in Wilson spending more time behind bars. This new calculation was done by the DOC's "sentence computation specialist."

Howard complained on behalf of his client. Vekos on Nov. 19 filed a motion to modify Wilson's sentence.

In her motion, Vekos acknowledged Tina.

"(I) cannot know exactly where the victim got her information about sentencing expectations but can only assure this court that up-to-date information about credit owed to the defendant was regularly provided to the victim advocate, Martha Bowdish," Vekos wrote in her motion.

Tina is outraged by the sentence and said the state's attorney's office should have received its initial time-serve information from the DOC's sentence computation specialist, rather than a different DOC source.

"They clearly didn't do a sentence calculation prior to the (sentencing) hearing," Tina stated

in a letter to the court opposing the amended sentence proposal while alleging Vekos hadn't contacted her for feedback on it.

"I was not informed about the motion or the state stipulating to the motion until it was filed. SA Vekos failed to tell my victim advocate about the motion, and my victim advocate learned about it after it was filed," she said.

Wilson will be eligible for release in around a year, with good behavior and time served. Court documents indicate he plans to move to another state. But that's done little to assuage Tina's concerns.

She attends twice-per-week therapy sessions and said security staff escorts her each day from her Burlington workplace to her vehicle.

Her case simmered for more than two years before coming to what she calls an unsatisfactory resolution. Her case at one point was handled by former Addison County Deputy State's Attorney Kim McManus, who has since moved to another job.

"(McManus) made me feel like she cared about me and what I went through. She was willing to go the long mile. With Eva, I feel she wants to be done (with the case), to call it a number," Tina said.

Vekos challenged that assertion.

"They should never feel like a number, or that they're not being heard, or not being involved in important decision making. There isn't a prosecutor anywhere who doesn't have a case where a victim feels dissatisfied with the result. And that's especially true in cases of domestic assault and sexual assault — cases that are so personal and so hateful and intense," she said. "Feelings are very strong and I never want a victim to feel like they're feeling cut out or not listened to."

MAKING A PLEA DEAL

"**Roberta**" (who doesn't want her true name used) is the listed

victim in a Jan. 23, 2023, case charged as a felony lewd and lascivious conduct. The defendant is Jonathan Gay, 26, of Starksboro. The case was reassigned to Vekos in March following McManus's resignation.

The case was originally put on a September trial list but has gone through a series of court reschedulings. Roberta said she's now been told that sentencing in the case might not occur until this summer.

In the meantime, she said Vekos has crafted a plea deal that would call for the felony lewd & lascivious charge to be reduced to a misdemeanor "prohibited conduct" charge. Roberta's representatives said they didn't receive the plea deal paperwork until the Friday preceding the Monday, Dec. 16, court date at which at which the deal was to be unveiled.

Roberta said she's opposed to the proposed plea deal and is prepared to see the case go to trial.

"I won't go down to a lesser charge just to have her get done with (the case)," Roberta said. "I deserve justice, too."

DRAGGING OUT A CASE

Emma is a listed victim/survivor in state v. Robert Ritchey, who was charged with felony sexual exploitation luring a child and felony lewd & lascivious conduct with a child for an incident in 2020. She said she was concerned upon hearing that Vekos had elected to take on the case, given that Vekos had been assigned (while an attorney in private practice at Marsh & Wagner) to represent Emma in the Ritchey case.

Emma said that Vekos at the time had been representing another juvenile (in a separate matter) against whom Emma had a relief from abuse order. Emma said that at that time — and while she was under 18 — Vekos had reached out to her for information without her parents' consent.

Vekos ultimately stepped down as counsel of the juvenile against whom the relief from abuse order had been filed and stated that she hadn't talked to Emma about the Ritchey case, according to court records.

But Emma, among others, called on Vekos to enlist a different prosecutor.

McManus, in a March 23, 2023, email, stated, "our state's attorney has a conflict with this case so it will more than likely be assigned to (then assistant prosecutor) Mike Novelli."

Vekos disagreed with McManus's assessment. Novelli would soon switch jobs, and Vekos would take the case.

Ritchey on Jan. 23 pled guilty to L&L with a child, and the felony sexual exploitation charge was dismissed, according to court records.

Emma's reaction is one of sad resignation.

"I had agreed to just go with what they wanted. I just didn't want this to get dragged out. Now I can finally not worry about the next court date and what's going to happen."

Vekos told the *Independent* that she wants to have constructive discussions with crime victims.

"I don't think it would be appropriate to engage in a public debate with unidentified sources about specific cases," she said. "However, I would welcome the opportunity to meet with anyone involved in a case that I have prosecuted to have a constructive discussion. I stand by the record of my work in the hundreds of cases I've handled in over 27 years of legal practice, including the cases of the Addison County SA's office."

John Flowers is at johnf@addisonindependent.com.



RIPTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENROLLMENT OPPORTUNITY

Will your child be in kindergarten or 1st grade this September? There is an opportunity to join the K/1 class at Ripton Elementary School!

- ✓ Open to any ACSD town
- ✓ Transportation may be available on existing bus routes

To learn more (no commitment necessary) you must express interest by

March 3, 2025

by contacting one of the following:

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The principal at your local elementary school

Ashley Bessette, abessette@acsdvt.org



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