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Magazine

August 2023

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Commentary

Indictments, recalls, demolitions, resignations, and more – 10 things to watch for in the dog days of summer

By Paul Rozycki

We may be in the midst of record-breaking heat during these dog days of August, and the political future may be as hazy as the Michigan horizon on a humid summer evening, enveloped in Canadian forest-fire smoke.

But with all the risks, and in no particular order, here are a few things we should be watching as we move into the cooler winds of autumn this year. They all deserve our attention, and any of these may deserve a full column in the future.

• **More criminal indictments of former President Trump.** It seems likely that Trump will face criminal charges over his involvement in the Jan. 6 insurrection and the attempt to overturn the 2020 election, his handling of classified documents after he left the White House, as well as the charges surrounding the Stormy Daniels affair. Many of those trials will take place during the campaign. So far, the indictments have increased Trump's fundraising efforts and he has held his support among his base voters. If convicted, will he serve jail time? If he's acquitted, will he declare victory and boost his campaign? Will these charges have any impact on Trump's support or the 2024 election?

• **Charges against false electors.** Attorney General Dana Nessel brought criminal charges against 16 individuals who falsely claimed to be the legitimate electors in Michigan in an attempt to overturn the 2020 election. Several were Republican Party leaders and local elected officials. Six other states also had false electors who attempted to block the 2020 vote. Will the other states follow Michigan's actions,

and will there be federal charges that might include Donald Trump?

• **The Republican debates.** The Republican Party has planned debates for the dozen or more candidates who are vying for their party's presidential nomination. Will any of them be able to take on Donald Trump, who remains the front-runner in spite of criminal indictments and all the turmoil that comes with the former president? Will any of them be willing to confront Trump, or will Trump's opponents split up the vote and give Trump the nomination as in 2016?

• **Supreme Court student debt ruling.** With the recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings that blocked the forgiveness of college student debt, what response will follow? The Biden administration has now proposed to modify and limit student debt, short of a full forgiveness, but those plans will likely face legal barriers as well. Will they survive court challenges?

• **Affirmative action on college campuses.** With the Supreme Court decision limiting race-based affirmative action programs, colleges are now trying to find other ways to bring diversity to their campuses, such as considering income, high school ranking, or other factors. Will those be as effective as the traditional affirmative action programs, and will they be legally supported?

• **Repeal of Right to Work and the union movement.** A decade ago, to the surprise of almost everyone, Michigan, a strong union state, passed a "Right to Work" law that limited labor unions' ability to require membership or financial support as part of employ-

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Cover: Whaley Historical House



Photo of the Month: PorchFest 2023 in Carriage Town (Photo by Edwin D. Custer)

Education Beat Analysis

Upgrades proceed on Flint Schools' same lineup of 11 buildings; fewer than 3,000 students to report back on Aug. 9; no decisions on building closures

By Harold C. Ford

Fewer than 3,000 Flint Community Schools (FCS) students – based on last year's enrollment data – are scheduled to start the 2023-2024 school year Aug. 9. The district moves into its fifth year on a "balanced calendar" schedule in which students and staff report back earlier in the calendar year. A shortened summer vacation will be followed by additional scheduled breaks – Sept. 5-8, Oct. 23-27, Feb. 20-23, and Apr. 2-5 – called intercessions.

The school year calendar can be accessed at the district's website. The last school day for students is June 13, 2024.

Most FCS students will report back to a dramatically upgraded lineup of 11 FCS school buildings. The district's leadership is scrambling to spend COVID-19 relief dollars on buildings – some of which the district may soon close – by September, 2024, the sunset date for the Federal monies.

ESSER FUNDING

Sept. 2024 deadline

FCS leadership is moving forward with upgrades to all of its 11 existing buildings, funded largely and temporarily by several waves of federal dollars provided by federal ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief/COVID-19 relief) legislation. The district's \$140-\$150 million in ESSER funds easily surpasses the \$90-100 million awarded to the City of Flint.

ESSER dollars can be used by school districts through Sept 2024 to fund a variety of initiatives including:

- "to prevent, prepare for and respond to coronavirus";
- "activities to address the unique needs of low-income children or students, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth";
- "training and professional development for staff";
- "purchasing educational technology";

- "providing mental health services";
- "purchasing supplies to sanitize and clean the facilities".

ESSER funds may be used to upgrade existing facilities that house students. However, they cannot be used to build new facilities or upgrade buildings unoccupied by students.

In addition to its 11 school buildings that house students, FCS currently has 32 uninhabited buildings with 2.1 million square feet of floor space sitting on 270 acres. Additionally, the district owns 19 vacant parcels of land comprising another 22 acres.

At the July 12 meeting of the Flint Board of Education (FBOE), Interim Chief Financial Officer Brian Jones reported, "We have closed out the ESSER 1 and 2."

"ESSER 2 has been spent," added Kevelin Jones, "over \$44 million." The overall status of ESSER 3 was not provided at the FBOE's July meetings. "I'm

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not looking at this board if we're having to send back millions of dollars," Jones added.

Building upgrades move forward

Dan Methner, project manager for Clark Construction, the firm managing the construction process, reported on the progress being made at FCS buildings at the school board's July 12 meeting. Summary overviews are found below; renovation amounts approved by the FBOE at its May 10 and 17 meetings follow the name of the building while funding for some other projects may have been reported earlier and may have included monies from the FCS general fund:

- **Doyle/Ryder***: Remaining tasks included installation of plumbing fixtures, new ceiling tiles, LED lighting, new mirrors, partitions, and accessories; upgrades of restroom and stairwells; new paint on many surfaces.

- **Parking lot improvements***: "a big item," according to Methner, underway and nearing completion at Doyle/Ryder (front completed, not back) and Holmes (only striping spaces with paint remained); projects at Eisenhower, ALA, Pierce, Freeman, and Neithercut are works in progress; upgrades of electrical lighting in lots were necessary at some schools.

- **Potter, \$9,620,775**: interior demolition of auditorium to prepare for renovation had been completed; roof demolition is to begin Aug. 11 with completion expected by Aug. 25; some work is to be completed in November, 2023; replacement of exterior doors and windows; secured entry; main office relocation; full building upgrades of HVAC (heating, ventilation, air-conditioning), fire protection, electrical, fire alarms, lighting, ceiling replacement; painting of corridors and classrooms.

- **Holmes, \$21,415,967**: full building roof replacement; full building upgrades of HVAC, fire protection, electrical system, alarm system, ceiling

replacement, and lighting; new public address (P.A.) system; painting of corridors and classrooms; renovation of main office area.

District officials are preparing to send Holmes students to Southwestern during upgrades. A stinging criticism of that move came from Trustee Melody Relerford who called the plan "crap." "You're just throwing them (students) at the dogs," she charged. She said the plan was a "pipeline to prison" approach and was setting her grandson, a Holmes student, up for disaster.

Assistant Secretary/Treasurer Laura MacIntyre, on the other hand, voiced support for Kevelin Jones and his administrative team. "You [Jones] were working very hard and you haven't stopped," she said. "I have the utmost confidence; I've seen all of you [the transition team] at work."

- **Durant-Tuuri-Mott, \$5,534,697***

- **Eisenhower, \$2,449,651***: roof replacement; secured entry; wall graphics and painting of corridors and classrooms; office renovation(s); landscaping upgrades; new directional signage; new entry door and ramp replacement.

- **ALA, \$1,035,776***: secured entry; new P.A. system; new wall graphics and painting of corridors and classrooms; office renovations; landscaping upgrades; new directional signage.

- **Southwestern, \$4,161,487***

Holmes students will attend Southwestern at the start of the 2023 school year; Holmes students will attend classes in the east wing of the building, Southwestern students will occupy the west wing; the gymnasium and cafeteria will be used by both groups.

- **Neithercut, \$774,094***: secured entry; new wall graphics and painting of corridors and classrooms; office renovation; landscaping upgrades; new directional signage; upgrade of P.A. system.

- **Pierce***: parking lot upgrades reported at the FBOE's July 12 meeting.

- **Brownell, \$8,733,730**: full building roof replacement; full building upgrades of HVAC, fire protection, electrical, fire alarm, lighting, ceiling replacement; painting of corridors and classrooms; new P.A. system; main office

renovation; secured entry; replacement of exterior doors and windows.

- **Doyle/Ryder***: Installation of LED lighting and plumbing fixtures, upgrades of restroom and stairwells, and other projects should be completed within weeks. Parking lot improvements remain a "big item" with striping of the completed front lot remaining; work to upgrade the back lot had not yet begun. Doyle/Ryder has been closed since

- **Washington demolition**, bid packages were issued on July 6, will be opened July 27; Clark Construction will meet with the FBOE on Aug. 9 and 16 to review bids and award contracts; demolition start is expected to be Aug. 30 with an Oct. 6 completion date. "The building is unsafe ... because of contaminated materials," Methner said. Thus, the demolition is proceeding more slowly than might be expected.

[*Funding amounts and/or funding sources and/or upgrades not reported at the FBOE's July 2023 meetings. Please see YouTube recording of FBOE's May 10, 2023 meeting, starting at about the 2:10:00 mark, and other FBOE meetings, for additional details.]

Late to the task or designed to fail?

FCS leaders are scrambling to spend the massive amount of Federal ESSER funds before the September 2024 sunset date. A lengthy period of seeming inactivity by FCS officials has been replaced with an urgency to spend the remaining Federal monies.

"We wasted almost a year," bluntly chided Joyce Ellis-McNeal, FBOE vice president.

But FBOE Laura MacIntyre deflected blame from the district's leadership, of which she is a key member, and pointed to the provider(s) of the ESSER dollars:

"There are restrictions that have been imposed on us that are beyond our control ... it's designed to make us fail so that we don't spend this money," she

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Rozycki commentary ...

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ment. Recently Michigan became the first Right to Work state in decades to repeal the law. Unions have been in decline since the early Reagan years and the middle class has shrunk at the same time. As workers are in greater demand in nearly every enterprise, will we see a resurgence of the union movement and perhaps a return of the growth of the middle class? A number of major corporations are seeing their employees attempt unionization for the first time. We've seen strikes from Hollywood writers and actors, and there is a possibility that the UAW may be looking at a walkout, as contract negotiations begin in the fall.

- **The No Label Party.** Third parties have a long history in the U.S. Though they rarely win elections, they can have a major impact on who does win, and what the major issues are. Some feel that Ralph Nader's third party candidacy prevented Al Gore from winning in 2000, and many felt that Ross Perot made balancing the budget a key issue for Bill Clinton in the 1990s. Some suggest that third party candidates helped Trump win the Electoral College in 2016. Most polls show that the public is not very excited about a rematch between Democrat Joe Biden and Republican Donald Trump. In response, a third party, the No Label Party, is planning to put forward a candidate that may draw from both parties. But it's unclear who may be their nominee, what their platform or issues might be, or the impact they could have on the 2024 election. Because some of the major supporters of the No Label Party are Republican, some fear that they could pull votes away from Biden and give Trump the advantage.

- **City council elections and politics.** In Flint, two-thirds of the Flint City Council members are facing recalls, and a new councilperson has been appointed in

the 7th Ward. Will this change any of the current conflict and chaos in the council or will the attempted recalls simply increase the conflict and hostility in the council? Will Flint finally distribute its ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds, in spite of a lawsuit over the creation of the ARPA committee? Also, Burton is holding its city council elections and may see a significant change in a number of positions.



The burnt remains of the once-majestic Washington Elementary School on Flint's east side

(Photo by Paul Rozycki)

- **Flint schools and the demolition of Washington school.** The current plans are to begin the demolition of the burned out remains to Washington School on Flint's east side, at the end of the summer. Will that be a motive for the Flint Community School board to begin to get rid of the many vacant and deteriorating buildings that it currently owns? Will there be any less conflict on the board in the future and will they be able to reverse the downward slide in Flint school enrollment?

- **Dutta to leave U of M-Flint.** At the U of M-Flint, Chancellor Debashish Dutta is leaving for a new position at the University of Illinois after a short tenure in Flint. What does that mean for the proposed move to a more occupational and technical role for the Flint campus? Will a new chancellor continue the shift away from a liberal arts campus? Will they be able to reverse the decline in student enrollment and graduation rates? Will they be more open to listening to faculty, staff, and the community?

All of these are worth watching. The autumn weather may be cooler, but this fall may generate more political heat than we've seen this summer.

EVM political columnist Paul Rozycki can be reached at paul.rozycki@mcc.edu.

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said. "We had these very strange, specific criteria that kept shifting and the goalposts kept shifting."

FBOE Treasurer Dylan Luna sounded a warning that may prove prophetic: "My only concern is that, in the future ... we're going to have to close one of these schools."

RIGHTSIZING an elusive challenge

FCS will start the 2023-2024 school year with the same lineup of 11 buildings – Southwestern; Holmes; Accelerated Learning Academy (ALA); Brownell; Doyle/Ryder; Durant-Tuuri-Mott; Eisenhower; Freeman; Neithercut; Pierce; and Potter – that existed when this writer penned his first Education Beat article for *EVM* in March 2017.

FCS has known for at least half a decade – during the superintendencies of Derek Lopez (2018-2020), Anita Steward (2020-2021), and Kevelin Jones (2021-present) – that the district had too many buildings for too few students and that that combination has exacted a dreadful toll on the district's financial stability. It challenges the district's budget beyond its means to service and staff underpopulated buildings.

FCS has been advised by multiple parties – its own staff, the Michigan Department of Education, the auditing firm Plante Moran Cresa (PMC), representatives of the United Teachers of Flint and the Michigan Education Association, the public, and others – that unless it cuts operational costs and/or enhances its revenue stream the district will find itself returning to a familiar financial profile of an annual budget deficit and long-term financial debt when COVID-19 relief funds disappear in Sept. 2024.

In June 2023, PMC told FBOE members, "FCS (is) currently operating, maintaining, and securing nearly three million square feet (of building space) and nearly 450 acres (of land)." Further, PMC representatives reported less than 50 percent of elementary classrooms and

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Candice Mushatt elected to serve as Seventh Ward councilperson in a 5 to 2 vote

By Tom Travis

City Council elected Candice Mushatt to represent Flint's Seventh Ward Wednesday night. According to the city's charter, the council had until July 30 to choose a successor for former Seventh Ward Councilperson Allie Herkenroder who resigned as of July 1.

Mushatt has recently worked as a Community Education Advocate for the City of Flint teaching fire safety throughout the city. Mushatt brings previous work experience from working in former Mayor Karen Weaver's administration as communications director.

From five to four candidates

As of last week there were five Seventh Ward residents contending for the council seat: Doug Matthews, Mercedes Kinnee, Candice Mushatt, Shannon Searcy and Ira Gilbert. All candidates were present at last night's meeting however Gilbert left the meeting and did not participate in the candidate panel for the interviews.

The panel of four remaining candidates sat at the head of the council meeting area. Seven council members were present, Councilperson Eric Mays (Ward 1) having been ejected earlier in the meeting after receiving two warnings for disruptive behavior.

The candidate interview process included two rounds of questioning from the seven councilmembers. In the first round each councilperson was given five-minutes to ask each candidate questions followed by a two-minute round of questioning.

Mushatt prevails with five votes

In the end there were two rounds of voting to choose the new councilperson. In the first round Councilpersons Ladel Lewis, Quincy Murphy, Judy Priestley voted for Candice Mushatt. Councilperson Jerri Winfrey-Carter and Dennis Pfeiffer voted for Shannon Searcy. Councilperson Tonya Burns voted for Mercedes Kinnee and Eva Worthing voted for Doug Matthews.

Mushatt was successful in the second round of voting with her five winning votes coming from Lewis, Murphy, Priestley, Pfeiffer and Worthing. Both Winfrey-Carter and Burns voted for Searcy and Kinnee, respectively again.

Mushatt was supported by five family members who sat through the nearly five-hour council meeting. Her family came to give her hugs after the vote was announced that she had won.

Letter of interest from Mushatt

Each candidate submitted an application for the position of Seventh ward councilperson. Below is the "letter of interest" submitted by the newly elected Seventh Ward councilperson, Candice Mushatt.

Dear City Clerk and Council Members:

I am writing to express my sincere interest in serving as the Seventh Ward City Councilperson. With a strong background in public service, community engagement, and effective leadership, I am confident in my ability to represent and advocate for the residents of the Seventh Ward.

My professional experience has provided me with a comprehensive understanding of the diverse needs and concerns of our community. As a former Public Information Officer for the City of Flint, I played a vital role in navigating a complex crisis, ensuring accurate information was disseminated, and engaging with residents during a challenging time. This experience has instilled in me a deep sense of responsibility to serve my community and work tirelessly to address the issues that matter most to its residents.

In addition to my role as a Public Information Officer, I currently serve as the Director of the Flint Community Water Lab, where I actively collaborate with local officials, community organizations, and residents to promote water safety and ensure the well-being of our community. Through my work as an on-air personality for a local radio station, I have developed

strong relationships with community members and gained valuable insights into their concerns and aspirations.

Furthermore, I have served as a board member of the Genesee Conservation District, where I contributed to important decisions regarding environmental conservation, land management, and agricultural practices. This experience has deepened my understanding of sustainability and the importance of responsible stewardship of our natural resources.

My tenure as a legislative staffer for the Michigan House of Representatives, coupled with my contract communications work for the National Wildlife Federation and the African American Mayors Association, has equipped me with a comprehensive understanding of policy-making, effective communication strategies, and the importance of advocating for diverse communities.

If given the opportunity to serve as the Seventh Ward City Councilperson, I will be a passionate advocate for our community's needs, an accessible representative for all residents, and a champion of transparent and accountable governance.

I will work diligently to address key issues, such as infrastructure development, public safety, equitable access to essential services, economic development, blight, community education, and environmental conservation. I believe in fostering collaboration and actively engaging with community members to ensure their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed.

Furthermore, my experience in budget management, successful grant writing, and growing the Flint Community Water Lab will be valuable assets in supporting the economic development initiatives of the Seventh Ward.

I have a proven track record of effectively managing budgets and securing grants, which has allowed me to expand the resources and capabilities of the Water Lab, making a tangible impact on the community.

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Village Life ...

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hour after hour.

Early on in the brick laying project. I spoke with Site Foreman Kyle Livingston and Project Manager Chriss Hoffman from Michigan Pavers and Walls, located in Flint Township. Kyle said the crew of 14 bricklayers put down about 50 feet of bricks each day.

In addition to brick layers, there are a gaggle of construction and masonry workers, electricians, engineers, heavy machinery operators stirring up lots of dust this summer on Saginaw Street.

Often the streets are filled with all of them working together. To watch them working together I wonder if there's some unseen conductor directing all the different parts to come together like a ballet playing out all their tasks. It seems they all work in harmony and in conjunction with each other to lay brick, put down underground wires, and install lamp posts on top of the concrete and new curbs.

So, especially during hectic and chaotic days, I would stroll downtown and watch the bricklaying process. The orderly arrangement of new bricks placed and the symmetry of it all seemed to wash over my wearied brain with a sense of peace.

Today there are three blocks with brand new bricks open for traffic. The barriers have been removed and vehicles are back to traveling up and down Saginaw Street. The new lines have been painted and the embattled parking meters stand at attention to snap a photo of license plates on the curbs.

The brick laying project has been paused until after the Back to the Bricks, Bikes on the Bricks and the Crim Festival of Races are completed. The longtime Crim race at the end of

August has traditionally, for Flint folks, marked the end of summer.

But then, in the fall, the bricklayers will continue their work north on Saginaw Street for a couple of months. In the spring of 2024 the team will complete the last two blocks, in front of the University Pavilion up to where the street crosses the Flint River.

You can follow the progress of the bricklaying project at the following link: <https://fixthebricksflint.com>.

As with any local government decision, there are lots of naysayers in Flint who think the \$5 million price tag is unnecessary or misspent money. Some suggest the money could be spent on better things or the bricks should have been removed and asphalt put down instead of bricks. But the nostalgists, including me and my troubled back, are cheering hurray for these beautiful bricks and the skilled, steady workers who are laying them down.

My back pain goes on and will be with me to the grave. These new bricks will live on for another 100 years. As I stroll through the Sloan Museum of Discovery and the Gloria Coles Flint Public Library's local history room and stare at the 100 year old photos of the bricklayers and workers, I wonder who they were, if any of them were related to me, what are their stories. I've taken a lot of photos this summer of this brick project and wonder who will be look-

ing at my photos 100 years from now wondering what the stories are of this 2023 bricklaying team. I wonder if in the past generations there were others watching -- maybe a middle-aged guy with a bad back -- and enjoying the calm of observing their skilled ballet. And 100 years from now, will there be another guy standing on Saginaw Street admiring their symmetry?

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Ed Beat ...

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38 percent of secondary classrooms in use for general education purposes.

PMC representatives Joe Asperger and Nicole Blocker showed FBOE members an "Enrollment Projection" chart at its July 19 meeting that indicated FCS student enrollment would plummet to 2,176 students by the year 2027: 303 students in grades 9-12; 387 students in grades 6-8; and 1,486 students in grades K-5.

[Interested persons can view the chart at about the 1:40:00 mark of the YouTube recording of the meeting.]

Asperger and Blocker gently suggested that the district consider closures of Eisenhower, Pierce, Neithercut, and the Administration Building.

Every attempt in recent years to close a building has been unsuccessful. Nor has the district succeeded in selling or demolishing any of its 32 uninhabited buildings sitting on 270 acres or 19 vacant parcels of land comprising another 22 acres.

At its July 19 meeting, FBOE members once again, as in the past, examined demographic data, student enrollment figures, building utilization information, maps of the district, and possible scenarios for consolidation or closures. And yet again, district leadership made no decisions about rightsizing Flint Community Schools.

"It's drowning us as it pertains to costs," warned Superintendent Jones, referencing the district's predicament of too many buildings for too few students. "We won't survive if we have this many buildings open."

Future meetings of the FBOE for the 2023 calendar year are scheduled for: Aug. 9 and 16; Sept. 13 and 20; Oct. 11 and 18; Nov. 8 and 15; and Dec. 13 (two meetings). Meetings now take place at Southwestern, 1420 W. Twelfth St., Flint. Meetings start at 6:30 p.m. and can be viewed on YouTube.

EVM Education Beat reporter Harold C. Ford can be reached at hcford1185@gmail.com.

Mushatt ...

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I am eager to contribute my skills, experience, and passion to create positive change and improve the quality of life for the residents of the Seventh Ward. I believe that my diverse background, community-focused mindset, and commitment to transparent and inclusive decision-making make me an ideal candidate for this position.

Thank you for considering my application. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss my qualifications further and explore how my vision aligns with the goals of the City Council and the needs of the Seventh Ward. I look forward to the possibility of serving our community in this important role.

Sincerely,

Candice Mushatt



**New Seventh Ward Councilperson
Candice Mushatt**

(Photo submitted by Candice Mushatt)

Questions covered an array of topics

Councilperson Winfrey-Carter asked Mushatt, "The city is hurting in so many ways and has been divided racially for years. how would you work to heal the city?"

Mushatt said, "Stop saying we don't see color. Race is a social construct. The reality is that we've all been born into that construct. We can all see each other's color. That will be part of the solution, seeing that

we are different and in knowing that our skin and our complexion does not make you the person who you are."

Mushatt said her focus is "equity ... we have to see each other, embrace each other and then make sure we all get the same things."

What's Flint's greatest need?, asked Winfrey-Carter. Mushatt responded economic development, blight, and crime.

"So for me it all boils down to that we are able to care for our families in a way you want to provide for ourselves and that comes from having an economy that provides for everyone."

How would you handle tense situations in council meetings?

Burns asked Mushatt how would handle the often tense situations that occur in council meetings. Burns referenced cuss words sometimes being hurled at each other and how she would she try to de-escalate the situation. Mushatt responded, "We're all adults right?"

Mushatt noted if she were chosen to serve on council she would be the youngest and said she would expect some "maturity" to be displayed by all. "I would expect councilmembers to maintain themselves. Nobody coming to council meeting, to do city business, should get cussed out and called stupid or told to shut-up. We are humans and we all have breaking points. We are all strong personalities but it starts with respect.

How would you respond to constituents as a councilmember?

Pfeiffer asked Mushatt other than attending council meetings what she sees as her responsibility as a councilperson. Mushatt said, "To be responsive to residents when they call and they have concerns ... I am sitting here for the opportunity to serve my community and specifically the Seventh ward. It would be up to me to be responsive and to get the residents connected with who they need to be."

Worthing asked Mushatt, "What is your best quality that makes you the right candidate for the Seventh ward?"

"Integrity. I am who I am no matter what. Since my time in high school I've wanted to volunteer and work to do things in my community," responded Mushatt.

(Continued on Page 15)

Dutta out at UM – Flint as UMF fall enrollment numbers disappoint; “Strategic Transformation” put on hold

By Jan Worth-Nelson

Debasish Dutta, chancellor of the University of Michigan - Flint since 2019, is leaving for the University of Illinois as special assistant to the president beginning Sept. 16 for a salary of \$425,000.

University of Michigan President Santa J. Ono formally announced the departure July 18 in an open letter to the campus.

Perhaps the biggest news about the resignation, which seemed to take most UM - Flint faculty by surprise, is that Ono announced the campus's almost year-long “Strategic Transformation” process aimed to address serious fiscal and academic issues on the downtown campus, will be put on pause while the search for a new chancellor begins.

“Chancellor Dutta has been a strong advocate for the UM-Flint campus even before he was appointed chancellor in the fall of 2019,” Ono wrote. “He accepted this key position knowing the challenges that lay ahead – even before the pandemic disrupted everything.

“He has maintained that commitment and strongly advocated for the transformation of the UM-Flint campus to better align the academic programs with the skills sought by employers throughout mid-Michigan,” Ono said. “I applaud him for this essential work that seeks to create new opportunities for UM-Flint students and the entire Flint community.”

Ono added he will work with university leadership to identify an interim chancellor as the national search for Dutta's replacement gets underway.

“This transition also will require a pause in the transformation work that so many UM-Flint faculty, staff and students have helped to developed,” he said. “The Board of Regents and I remain firmly committed to a brighter future for the Flint campus. I want to assure you the transformation work will move forward once we have a new campus leader in place.”

Dutta has been associated from his first arrival on campus with the Strategic Transformation process, a campaign imposed on UM - Flint by Ann Arbor administration in the face of many financial and institutional challenges at UM - Flint.

A range of severe problems propelled the process: a 30 percent enrollment drop – to fewer than 6,000 in 2020; a 35 percent graduation rate; and a \$7.3 million budgetary deficit in 2021 – all understood

than amiable.

A group of faculty, staff, students and alumni who call themselves the “people's UM-Flint” to distinguish themselves from the official Strategic Transformation process held a series of town halls at which they strongly voiced concerns that the Strategic Transformation process, was too “top-down,” privileges potential employers over students, neglects the actual needs of the Flint community, and emphasizes a business model at the expense of the liberal arts – long the UMF's mainstay.

During public comments at an October meeting of the Board of Regents, the UM's elected governing body, Susan Gano-Phillips, a tenured psychology professor for decades and for seven years dean of the UM-Flint's College of Arts and Sciences before being fired, asserted numerous complaints have emerged – and been filed through official channels – about Dutta's administration, alleging “discrimination, retaliation, dishonesty, coercion, bullying, and failure to engage in shared governance.”

The Strategic Transformation process kicked off last summer. As detailed in previous *East Village Magazine* stories, an Aug. 29 “charge letter” from then-interim UM president Mary Sue Coleman made it clear the situation was serious, and asserting minor adjustments would not be enough to “reverse any of these negative trends” on the Flint campus.

She said the need to implement bold changes was based on “a realistic description of the financial realities facing UM-Flint” provided to top UM management and the Board of Regents by Dutta, since his arrival as UM-Flint's eighth Chancellor in August, 2019.

Coleman, who had come back to lead the university after the firing of former UM President Mark Schlissel, set a December, 2022 deadline for the plan to



UM-Flint Chancellor Debasish Dutta, PhD.

(Photo by Tom Travis)

to threaten the Flint regional UM campus.

Enrollment at UM - Flint was 5,985 in 2022, down from 7,300 the year Dutta arrived, according to numbers provided by official UM sources.

An anonymous source inside UM - Flint reports enrollment for the upcoming fall semester are “the worst ever.” Sources who could confirm or clarify this on the record have not yet responded.

Dutta received a 15 percent raise for the 2022-23 fiscal year, bringing his yearly salary to \$469,000, according to publicly available sources. On average, the rest of the Flint university faculty and staff received raises of about 3-5%. The overall University of Michigan pay raise for 2022-23, was 4.1%.

His tenure has been marked by dissension and conflict, and his relationship with many faculty has been less

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Dutta out ...

(Continued from Page 10)

be completed.

She also wrote, "At the end of this study and with the approval of the President, a one-time financial investment (which will be dispersed as milestones are achieved) will be committed by the University."

In the meantime, UM got a new president, Santa J. Ono, who took up the position in October. The UM hired Huron Consultants, a large international business consultation firm based in Chicago, to organize and run the Strategic Transformation process on the Flint campus.

The hiring of Huron was controversial, with a group of faculty noting that Huron's work on other campuses nationwide led to severe budget and program cuts, with particular slashes to the liberal arts and humanities.

UM - Flint under Dutta's leadership missed the deadlines Coleman had originally proposed. The Strategic Transformation process was divided into two halves -- the academic side and the student services side. The former, following months of meetings and analyses by the Huron group, was said to have wrapped up in early spring, with the student services analyses immediately following. But announcements as to the results of that study have been few and far between with even those on campus unclear and uncertain about what was happening or about to happen.

Recent requests from EVM for followup on the Strategic Transformation process and outcomes were given a one-sentence response by UM - Flint Director of Marketing and Communications Robb King, who referred a reporter to Dutta's May 26 message to the campus. It is the most recent communicate posted on the Strategic Transformation website, and in it Dutta offered few specifics about decisions made so far. He stated,

"While the process has taken longer than initially anticipated, it is better to be thorough and deliberate rather than simply adhering to a date on the calendar. That being said, those involved with the day-to-day oversight of the project understand

and appreciate why we are taking our time: because we need to get it right."

He added, "As we shared in March, part one of the initiative resulted in several proposals for expanding current academic programs due to market opportunities, and recommendations for new academic programs. I am currently engaged in discussions about those with President Ono and the Regents.

"In the coming weeks, I will discuss with President Ono and the Regents part two of our work, which considers academic services, including improving student services and refining related processes. They will consider the totality of the projects, the timeline and targets for the implementation, as well as the funds necessary."

Morale has reportedly plunged among the UM - Flint faculty, particularly those in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), especially after Gano-Phillips was fired last summer and several CAS departments abruptly moved out of the unit and into the new College of Innovation and Technology (CIT). Several remaining departments, including English, were folded into one new one chaired by a communications professor in a move perceived as deprioritizing one of the former powerhouses of the University's academic units.

Significantly, this spring, UM - Flint tenured and tenure-track faculty organized themselves into a union, joining the American Federation of Teachers/American Association of University Professors (AFT-AAUP). In June, the organizers of the union issued a statement expressing concern "regarding ongoing austerity and possible investment on the UM - Flint campus, especially in light of pledges of investment in UM - Flint that remain as yet unfulfilled."

In fact, the rumored and promised "one time financial investment," said to be \$100 million, has not materialized, sources say.

In the statement, faculty decried the lack of transparency and uncertainty about crucial campus issues, with particular concerns about what seems to be a push toward austerity. "...It is impossible to plan for the future when basic questions regarding what resources will be made available remain shrouded in secrecy," they stated.

Unclassified Ad

Apartment for Lease.

Two-bedroom second floor apartment on cul-de-sac Avon St. near Kearsley St. Features appliances, laundry, off street parking, small deck and a large back yard. On site management. \$775 a month plus electricity. Heat and water included. No pets. References and credit check requested. E-mail: ecuster@sbcglobal.net or write to Apartment Box 2, 720 E. Second St., Flint 48503.

Apartment for Lease.

Two-bedroom, second floor apartment. It has a large deck, off street fenced parking, laundry, storage. On Avon near Kearsley Street. In the center of it all. Walk three blocks or less to UM-Flint, MCC, downtown, Cultural Center, Farmers Market, Library, horticultural gardens, four parks. and easy freeway access. On site management. \$695 per month plus utilities. References and credit check requested. No pets. E-mail: ecuster@sbcglobal.net or write: Apartment Box 11, 720 E. Second St. MI 48503.

Studio Apartment for Lease.

Spacious efficiency (540 sq. ft.) in historic Central Park on cul-de-sac Avon available August. Walk four blocks or less to UM-Flint and MCC campuses, Cultural Center, Downtown, Farmers Market, four parks, bike paths, and easy freeway access. One story semi-detached efficiency, many windows, and hardwood floors, deck onto large backyard, off street parking. References and credit check requested. No pets. On site management. \$625 per month plus electricity. Heat and water included. E-mail ecuster@sbcglobal.net or write: Apartment Box 7C, 720 E. Second St., Flint MI 48503.

"Many faculty and staff feel frustrated and isolated knowing that a transformation is imminent, but without yet having a clear sense of the vision guiding this transformation or how our voices have informed it. Further, while there is interest in building new programs, no financial commitment has yet been made to address long-standing infrastructural issues such as concerns over our university website, a

(Continued on Page 12)

Dutta out ...

(Continued from Page 11)

marketing plan, or updating and maintaining our IT resources.”

The full text of the faculty statement is attached below.

The departure contrasts with a more positive picture offered by Dutta in a December interview with EVM.

The University of Michigan - Flint is “a beacon of hope” for the Flint community, he declared, adding he intended to keep it that way.

“I am committed to doing everything I can do to make the UM - Flint strong – financially strong, programmatically strong, and relevant to the region, its employers and so on,” he said then.

“Let’s be honest here,” he said at the time. “I’m trying to turn this place around. I didn’t create this mess...I did not. I came in August of ‘19, opened the books, found a mess, and said, oh my God, let’s try to fix it...”

Dutta, who holds a Ph.D. from Purdue University and spent 20 years at UM - Ann Arbor as a mechanical engineering professor, came to Flint after one year at Rutgers University - New Brunswick, where he was chancellor. Before that, he was provost and executive vice president of academic affairs and diversity at Purdue University. Before that, he was at the University of Illinois–Champaign-Urbana, where he was associate provost and dean of the graduate program.

He has a long familiarity with Flint; his wife, Fataneh Taghaboni-Dutta, Ph.D., was a faculty member of UM-Flint for nearly 20 years.

At least one faculty source who has been very involved in the Strategic Transformation process said the news caught him by surprise, commenting, “Wow. I am speechless.”

Another source declining to be identified asked to speculate on the news, said, “This is him getting out on purpose. He failed.”

Questions posed by EVM which received no specific reply other than referral to Dutta’s May 26 message were the following:

1. What is Dutta’s response to the

statement of the UMF AFT-AAUP Organizing Committee “Regarding Ongoing Austerity and Possible Investment on the UM-Flint Campus”?

2. Based in part on those expressed concerns, is there indeed still the suggestion of a \$100 million commitment/investment in the campus? If so, is that an accurate amount? And if so, where is it coming from, and under what criteria?

3. Is the Huron group still at work on the process? If so, how might you characterize their work at this point?

4. Have specific decisions been made at this point about program changes, additions, deletions? If so, what are they?

5. Will there be a final report issued to the campus and public about the outcome of the months of study, consideration, decision making?

Statement of the UMF AFT-AAUP Organizing Committee Regarding Ongoing Austerity and Possible Investment on the UM-Flint Campus

The Organizing Committee of the UMF AFT-AAUP wishes to express its concern regarding ongoing austerity on the UM-Flint campus, especially in light of pledges of investment at UM-Flint that remain as yet unfulfilled.

Beginning in the Fall 2022 semester, university officials have regularly suggested that a large investment is forthcoming for the UM-Flint campus. Throughout the campus “Transformation” process overseen by UM-Flint Chancellor Debasish Dutta, campus partners have been asked to suggest transformative projects, under the implicit (and sometimes explicit) understanding that there will be money to support at least some of these ideas. Indeed, the Detroit Free Press reported in February 2023 that this investment is likely to be up to \$100 million.

We have and continue to be hopeful that such investments will be made on our campus, and that these investments will be made in a manner that supports all of our campus’ stakeholders in their work fulfilling UM-Flint’s mission. However, given that it has been nine months since the original news of this possible investment (at a September meeting of the UM-Flint

Faculty Senate), and nearly six months since the originally-scheduled end date of the campus transformation process, we are concerned that this investment is being indefinitely deferred.

Further, as we have waited to learn details about this investment, austerity has continued, with many deleterious effects. Faculty and staff morale is low; collaboration is increasingly difficult as individuals and units jockey for resources; consequential decisions, ranging from program reorganizations to workload-related policies, are being made under assumptions of continuing resource scarcity; and rumors of program closures and layoffs circulate regularly.

Perhaps most importantly, it is impossible to plan for the future when basic questions regarding what resources will be made available remain shrouded in secrecy. Many faculty and staff feel frustrated and isolated knowing that a transformation is imminent, but without yet having a clear sense of the vision guiding this transformation or how our voices have informed it. Further, while there is interest in building new programs, no financial commitment has yet been made to address long-standing infrastructural issues such as concerns over our university website, a marketing plan, or updating and maintaining our IT resources.

All of this pits faculty, as well as staff, against each other, devaluing and disempowering UM-Flint’s most valuable resource, i.e., those who labor on our campus.

In light of this, we urge the UM Board of Regents, UM President Santa Ono, and the UM-Flint administration to end this atmosphere of austerity through: a) moving quickly to announce and implement the aforementioned investments; b) increasing transparency about these investments and the vision guiding them; and c) ensuring that these investments support the work of all UM-Flint stakeholders, allowing us to work together in partnership for the betterment of our campus and the public good mission that it serves.

EVM Consulting Editor Jan Worth-Nelson can be reached at janworth1118@gmail.com.

Commentary

“The work of higher education must continue” – Emeritus faculty voice concern, yet again, about UM – Flint upheaval

By Theodosia Robertson

Theodosia Robertson is an associate professor emerita of history and an occasional columnist for East Village Magazine. She can be reached at teddyrob@umich.edu.

In November, 2022, I composed a letter of concern addressed to President Santa J. Ono of University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The letter was signed by 20 retired (emeritus) faculty of the UM-Flint College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), the original and core unit of the UM - Flint.

As the letter shows, we retired faculty were deeply concerned about several executive actions University of Michigan-Flint Chancellor Debasish Dutta was taking to try to transform the profile of the UM-Flint. Whatever the merits of the changes he and his team initiated, their consequences involved a dramatic reduction of the offerings, appeal, and fiscal viability of the historic core of the College of Arts and Sciences or CAS—the campus unit that provides liberal arts and sciences education at UM-Flint.

Equally alarming were statements by then (now former) CAS Dean Susan Gano-Philips, who described an alarming administrative environment marked by pressure, disregard for shared governance, and staff demoralization.

We retired professors cared about students when we were teachers at UM-Flint. We cared about students at the start of Chancellor Dutta's Strategic Transformation plan eight months ago. We care about UM-Flint students now.

The retired CAS faculty who signed on to the November, 2022 letter lived through significant changes in the constituent units of our Flint campus. Those included formation of the School of Management, the College of Health Sciences, the School of Education and Human Services, and the School of Nursing. We remember

discussions that were often contentious. Even when CAS faculty were not directly involved, we respected our colleagues and their work. UM-Flint changed and expanded over the years since its foundation, including the decades of our teaching there.

At this new juncture, with the departure of Chancellor Dutta, we care about potential upheaval in students' lives as they pursue higher education at UM-Flint. Our mission as teachers has always been to our students whose



(Graphic source: www.umflint.edu)

futures depend upon higher education -- both its skills and its values. That work must continue without upheaval.

Original letter from the emeritus faculty to President Ono:

Dear President Ono,

I am writing out of concern at the current situation of the College of Arts and Science (CAS) under the leadership of UM-Flint's chancellor, Debasish Dutta. The comments of former CAS Dean Susan Gano-Phillips at the October 20 Regents Meeting in Flint outlined the context around the June 2022 executive action by Chancellor Dutta to transfer three CAS academic programs (computer science, engineering, and physics) to form a new unit, the College of Information and Technology (CIT).

Together with emeritus colleagues who have signed here, I am concerned about both the manner in which CIT has been formed and the strength of CAS in the Strategic Trans-

formation process going forward. The disturbing statement by former Dean Susan Gano-Philips does not bode well for the future of liberal arts on the UM-Flint campus.

Articles about the situation have appeared in October 2022 in Flint's East Village Magazine. Links to those stories are here:

UM-Flint administration lambasted for “bullying,” “chaos,” at UM Regents meeting as heated public comments critique “Strategic Transformation” and call for firing consultant “One University” faculty, staff and students rally for equity and saving liberal arts at UM-Flint

Emeritus faculty have lived through several changes in the constituent units of our Flint campus; discussions were often contentious, but none so threatening as this situation. Susan Gano-Philips' statement reflects the emergence of a campus culture under Chancellor Dutta where pressure replaces reasoned decisions of shared governance and concomitant secrecy and confusion results in staff demoralization. Complaints through appropriate channels have not been recognized.

The new CIT unit, whatever its merits, has been created at a cost to the College of Arts and Sciences in a June action prior to the Strategic Transformation process publicly begun in August-September.

If this Strategic Transformation is to succeed, the role of the College of Arts and Science in the history and mission of the Flint campus as a university cannot be disregarded. An institution of integrity does not let complaints, grievances, and allegations go unanswered. Respect for the principle of shared governance is not only an academic value; it is an essential component for public acceptance of campus change.

(Continued on Page 15)

THIS MONTH IN THE VILLAGE

A selection of events available to our readers is highlighted — beginning after our publication date of Aug. 6. It's a sampling of opportunities in the city. To submit events for our September issue, email info about your event to pisenber@gmail.com by Aug. 26.

Tunes at Noon

All summer through Aug. 18, weekdays
from 11:45 a.m. to 1:15 p.m.

An eclectic soundboard of musicians from the greater Flint area play Mon.-Fri. at Willson Park in downtown Flint (on the UM-Flint campus at the corner of Wallenberg and 1st Streets).

This event is free.

For more info visit geneseefun.com.

Flint Institute of Arts

FOMA (Friends of Modern Art) Films for August are "Singing in the Rain," shown Fri. Aug. 12, Sat. Aug. 13 and Sun. Aug. 14. The following weekend the film will be "The Swimmer" on Fri., Aug. 19, Sat., Aug. 20, and Sun. Aug. 21. The last film for Aug. will be "Amélie" on Fri. Aug. 26, Sat. Aug. 27, and Sun. Aug. 28. Showtimes are Fri. and Sat. at 7:30 p.m. and Sun. at 2 p.m.

Flint Institute of Arts

1120 E. Kearsley St., Flint

For more info call 810-234-1695 or visit flintarts.org.

Book-Signing, Reading and Celebration

Sat. Aug. 12, 3 p.m.

East Village Magazine's own writer, Jan Worth-Nelson, wants to share her thoughts in the writing she's done since moving to Flint in the 1980s. Her recently published collection of essays, "That's My Moon Over Court Street" will resonate with anyone from Flint.

Totem Books

620 W. Court St., Flint

For more info call 810-407-6402

or visit totembooksflint.com.

Flint Drop Fest 2023

Sat., Aug. 12, 12-10 p.m.

This is the 11th Annual Flint Drop Fest, a one-day Arts and Electronic music festival, featuring more than 10 performance stages, talent from across the country, more than 100 vendors, art, and more.

Free and open to all ages in downtown Flint.

For more info visit facebook.com/flintdropfest2023.

Back to the Bricks

Aug. 14-19

Back to the Bricks is the five-day extravaganza event celebrated in Flint for 19 years.

For more info visit backtothebricks.org.

Events at The Capitol Theatre in August

Aug. 18, 7 p.m., "Monsters, Inc."

This is a family-friendly 2001 animated comedy from the creators of "Toy Story."

Tickets: Adults \$7, Children 12 and under \$2

Aug. 31, 8 p.m., Don McLean

Don McLean tours celebrating the 50th anniversary of

his hit "Bye-Bye, Miss American Pie."

Tickets: \$109-\$160

Genesee County Residents SAVE 30%.

The Capitol Theatre

140 E. 2nd St., Flint

For more info call 810-237-1530

or visit thefim.org.

Butterfly Hike

Aug. 19, 10 a.m.-12 p.m.

Join the For-Mar Nature Educators by hiking on the trails at For-Mar.

Learn about the nectar plants they need and how to attract them to your yard.

Pre-registration required by Aug. 18.

Cost: \$5 per person, ages 6 and up.

For-Mar Nature Preserve & Arboretum

2142 N. Genesee Rd., Burton

For more info visit

geneseecountyparks.org/for-mar-nature-preserve

or call 810-736-7100 x892.

HAP Crim Festival of Races

Aug. 25 and 26

This annual series of running and walking events has been held since 1977.

To get the schedule or other information visit crim.org/races/hap-crim-festival-of-races/.



Ed Custer's *East Village Magazine* logo
is reimagined for each issue by Patsy Isenberg.

Emeritus faculty ...

(Continued from Page 13)

On behalf of the undersigned, I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Theodosia (Teddy) Robertson

Associate Professor

of History Emerita

To see the full list of additional signers to this letter, visit EVM's website at eastvillagemagazine.org and read the full version of Robertson's commentary.

Here is the response to the letter to President Ono:

Sent Nov. 10, 2022.

Dear Professor Emerita Robertson and colleagues:

Thank you for taking the time to express your opinions and share your concerns. President Santa J. Ono and Chancellor Deba Dutta have asked me to respond.

As you may know, President Ono visited the UM-Flint campus Nov. 4 and it is clear to him that UM-Flint is an excellent institution with much promise that has the strong support of community leaders.

Both the president and the chancellor are aware of the concerns raised by Professor Gano-Phillips. The university took those allegations seriously and carefully reviewed the details of each situation and has responded appropriately.

Pursuant to the relocation of three academic programs from the College of Arts & Sciences to the College of Innovation & Technology, those moves were done to better align the disciplines represented, as well as research and faculty interests, to the more appropriate unit.

The moves were approved by the provost after her office received letters requesting the move signed by all faculty members who ultimately moved. Upon review of the request, and in consultation with the deans of both colleges, the move was approved by the

provost, the chancellor and the Board of Regents.

Finally, to address the concerns surrounding the strategic transformation initiative, it's important to reiterate that the Huron Consulting Group is not making any recommendations or decisions. The group is assisting the Flint campus with gathering market data and analysis.

We also would stress that campus leaders are examining the wants and needs of all concerned constituencies throughout the process. Input from faculty, staff, students and other stakeholders is coming in daily. All of this information will be considered along with the market analysis and program data before decisions are made or plans finalized concerning any academic programs at the university.

The end goal is to strengthen student outcomes at UM-Flint so the university is academically strong and financially viable in order to meet the needs of the citizens of our state and prepare UM-Flint graduates for productive careers.

Sincerely,

Rick Fitzgerald

Office of Public Affairs

Mushatt ...

(Continued from Page 7)

Councilperson Priestley asked Mushatt, and all the candidates, about their experience with social media and the plethora of negative comments that can come to council through different platforms.

"I'm all about respectful dialogue. But to get in the weeds of hate speech, it's not something I've ever done. I don't plan on doing that because that's just not the person that I am," Mushatt said.

Councilperson Eric Mays ejected from meeting before candidate interviews

Councilperson Eric Mays (Ward 1) was ejected from the council meeting after nearly an hour and half of being embroiled in a showdown of points of order, points of information and appeals to the ruling of the chair. Council Vice-President Ladel Lewis gave Mays two warnings for disruptive behavior. Mays walked out of the council meeting with two Flint police officers. While exiting the council meeting Mays stopped to address the audience.

EVM Managing Editor Tom Travis can be reached at tomntravis@gmail.com.

"That's My Moon Over Court Street"

by Jan Worth-Nelson

Booksigning Reading Celebration

**Saturday, August 12
3 p.m.**

**TOTEM BOOKS
620 W. Court Street**

Buy from Totem or order from:
janworth1118@gmail.com
or
amazon.com

That's My Moon Over Court Street
Dispatches from a life in Flint



Collected columns from East Village Magazine, 2007-2022

Jan Worth-Nelson

Village Life

The ballet of brick laying eases my poor back and offers peace to my summer

By Tom Travis

About 11 years ago I moved into a 100-year-old house in Flint. The decision was made to remove all the big, heavy radiators that were connected to the old boiler heating system. There were a lot of them. What do you imagine is the heaviest thing ever? Looking at a radiator it seems easy enough to wrap your arms around and hoist out of the house. Wrong! I've moved and helped move a fair share of pianos in my life,

including grand pianos. I've always thought those monstrosities were the heaviest thing around. But old radiators by far outweigh pianos, and radiators don't have wheels on the bottom to make for easier moving.

So, because of that moving marathon, I'm now the ever-pained owner of a herniated disc. I forget which disc but it's one of the lumbar discs. I dutifully attended several sessions of physical therapy which resulted in much improved mobility along with a laundry list of do-at-home exercises accompanied with a handful of stretchy cords and pulleys for my home exercising.

As I talk to my fellow quinquagenarian friends I've discovered most of them have these stretchy cords and pulleys at their homes too. It seems going to a physical therapist is a routine happening for us as we age and the body reminds us of its ongoing decay.

I'm reminded every day of that herniated disc -- when I bend over to pick up something from the floor, or I stand up after sitting on a hard surface or move just the wrong way. Like pretty



A bricklayer bends over his work laying "one brick at a time" on Saginaw Street this summer

(Photo by Tom Travis)

much everybody else, I have learned to live with these kinds of ills. I have a tool box of pain relief too, including: a heating pad, ice packs and a bottle of ibuprofen.

Don't worry, this isn't a boring essay about me whining as I get older. But hear me out.

When I came back to Flint about 12 years ago my circle of friends consisted of a lot of 20-year-olds. Not sure why but they were there and I needed some friends. Now, more than a decade later, my life seems to be filled with many different friends who are in their 60s, 70s and 80s. I hear and see their physical ills mounting and we discuss these physical, aging rites of passage regularly.

When I first returned to Flint I ran the Crim Race for five years in a row. But then came those pain in the back radiators. Unable to run anymore, I've taken to walking. My daily walks have become a regular form of exercise for me. I aim to walk 5,500 steps each day and usually once or twice a week I'll hit 8,000 to 10,000.

This spring as Saginaw Street

began its transformation with new bricks I often found myself taking my walks downtown. It was a noisy, dusty project at first, as big scooping machinery dug up the old bricks. But things changed later in May as the work went from scooping and digging to pallets of bricks wrapped in plastic appearing, and a team of about 14 bricklayers meticulously placing them, brick by brick, onto the newly flattened street. I became fascinated with the orderliness and symmetrical work by that team of bricklayers. It was artistic.

On my daily trek of 5,000 to 10,000 daily steps along Saginaw Street, I watched the bricklayers replace the tattered and worn old bricks with refinished and new bricks.

I started to notice something as I observed the bricklayers' careful work. Watching them lay down brick by brick seemed to calm me. I watched the steady, smooth flow of heavy machinery making a mess of removing old bricks. Then after the old bricks came out, the bricklaying team laid fresh new dirt, then a smooth new layer of sand, and finally the new bricks. I came back to watch it all day after day. Maybe my brain and mind needed that orderliness and symmetry.

When I watch gymnasts, dancers or contortionists doing what they do, I often think, "that's not something I could do, not with my back." With the bricklayers, it's the same thought, as they grab a brick, bend over and carefully place the new brick on the fresh sand, then stand up, grab another brick and bend over, again and again,

(Continued on Page 8)