

From the editor's desk

Rodrigues

—or Binienda?

The word we get is that Interim Superintendent Marco Rodrigues may not have the votes necessary to become “permanent” if he emerges as a candidate for the position, despite a solid performance to date on his part. This includes an “entry plan” Mr. Rodrigues recently submitted to the School Committee that Member John Monfredo deemed “a good start.” Working against Mr. Rodrigues is sentiment that remains strong for South High Principal Maureen Binienda to take on the role, a scenario that could easily develop if the city opts for a local search—rather than an expensive (and unnecessary) national quest. Meanwhile, Inside Worcester likes Mr. Rodrigues’ stated intent to be more open with the public than Dr. Boone was, and his desire to strengthen school safety. An external audit conducted by Good Harbor Techmark LLC resulted in recommendations on this front that make sense. Among these are defining what exactly constitutes a “safe school.” Another is improving a “disjointed organizational structure” for safety administration. A third is getting the community to “take ownership” of its surroundings. Adopt a school? Big decisions ahead for the new School Committee. There is the superintendent’s spot to fill, and hopefully continued resistance—as both the departing Tracy O’Connell Novick and the arriving Donna Colorio have urged—on conformity to a rewritten education law that still places too heavy an emphasis on standardized testing.

—R.L.

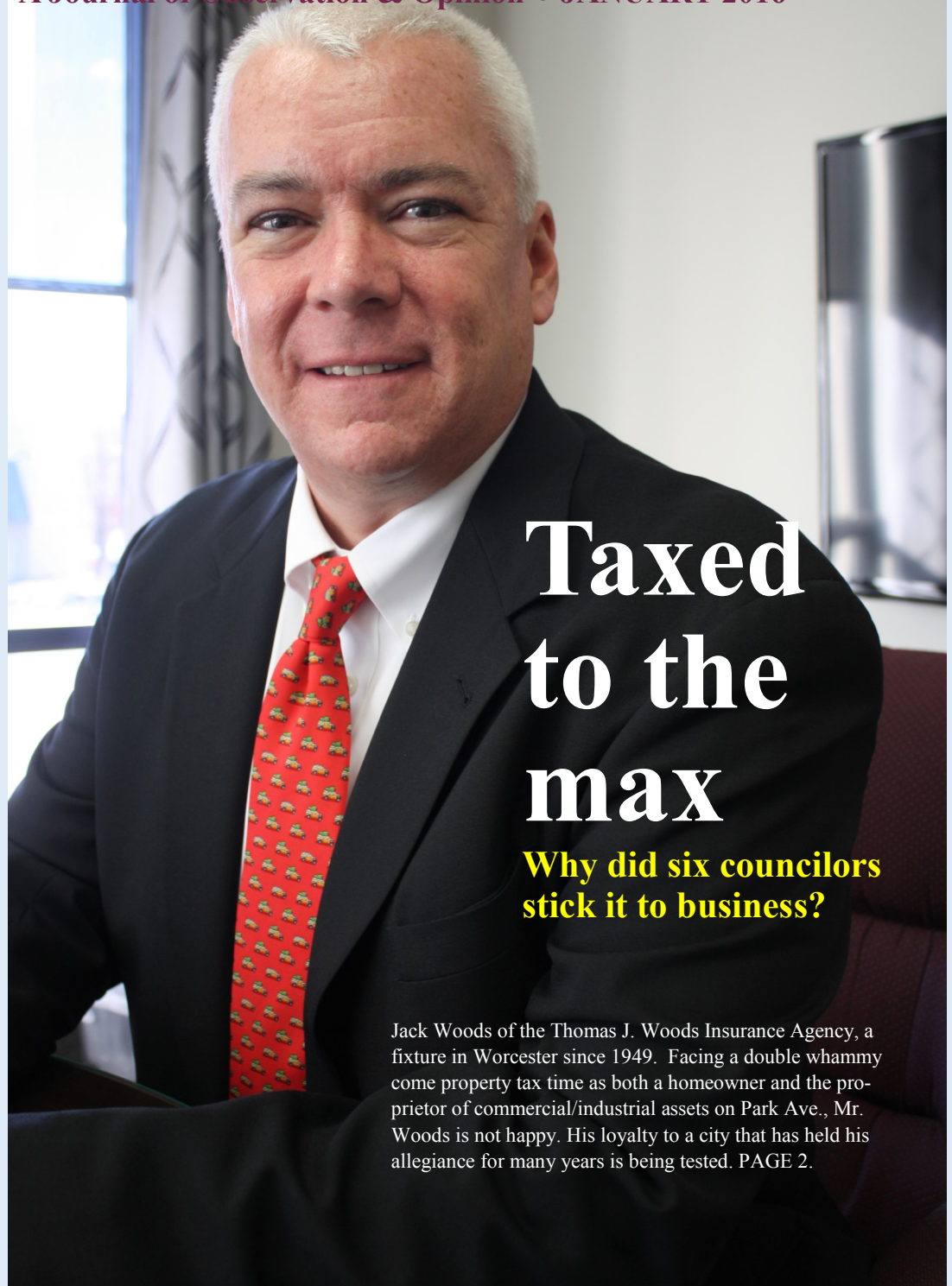


Smiles, sportsmanship & service!

“The Harlem Globetrotters 90th Anniversary World Tour” comes to the DCU Center on March 11th and 12th with something more than the always popular array of ball-handling wizardry, trick shots, hilarious comedy and fan interaction. This year “the Ambassadors of Goodwill” are adding “The Great Assist” community-outreach program. Order tickets now. More [SHOWTIME](#), Page 8.

Inside Worcester

A Journal of Observation & Opinion • JANUARY 2016



Taxed to the max

Why did six councilors stick it to business?

Jack Woods of the Thomas J. Woods Insurance Agency, a fixture in Worcester since 1949. Facing a double whammy come property tax time as both a homeowner and the proprietor of commercial/industrial assets on Park Ave., Mr. Woods is not happy. His loyalty to a city that has held his allegiance for many years is being tested. PAGE 2.

COVER STORY

A lack of foresight?

By ROD LEE

What possible motivation other than political could Councilors Morris A. Bergman, Michael T. Gaffney, Konstantina B. Lukes, Sarai Rivera, Gary Rosen and George J. Russell have had in voting “yea” on a tax rate that reverses an encouraging trend toward a classification that eases the strain on Worcester’s business community?

Asked point-blank if he felt this was the case after “the Deep-Six contingent” set the new rates at \$20.61 for residential and \$33.98 for commercial/industrial, assuring that companies like his Thomas J. Woods Insurance Agency will face staggering increases in their business-property tax bills in 2016, Mr. Woods said “I do think it’s mostly politically driven.”

A plea from Mr. Woods to Mr. Rosen (see box at right) as an attempt to swing the District 5 councilor’s sentiments in favor of rates of \$20.99 and \$33.04 pro-



Boston Market at 14 Park Ave., commercial property owned by Jack Woods that will be negatively impacted by higher business tax rates.

posed by Mayor Joseph M. Petty **did** generate a respectful reply. “Thanks for your input,” Mr. Woods said Mr. Rosen told him. “It was very cordial but direct.” Mr. Rosen would

not budge from his position favoring the homeowner.

This despite a full-court press by the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce that included a full-page ad in the Sunday Telegram on December 6th in which the Chamber noted that “Worcester businesses already pay \$26 million more (than neighboring municipalities) because of the dual tax rate.” An accompanying “business tax rate by community” map showed that companies in surrounding towns ante up significantly less, from a low of \$13.20 per thousand in Shrewsbury to \$23.26 in Auburn.

This despite as well an op-ed argument in the Telegram & Gazette on December 7th written by Dana Levenson (a Worcester resident who is president and CEO of Southgate at Shrewsbury) asserting that the city’s high commercial/industrial tax rates coupled with “the reputation of our public schools” stifles economic growth.

“They just don’t get it,” Chamber President Tim Murray told Inside Worcester after sitting in for a luncheon meeting of the Webster Square Business Association at Eller’s Restaurant in Leicester.

Mr. Murray termed the Council’s action “patently unfair” and “a step backward.”

Mr. Woods agrees, as does local real estate impresario Arthur Mooradian.

What the Council is doing “has hurt the image of the city,” Mr. Mooradian

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

Dear Councilor Rosen:

(An email prior to the big vote):

I am a lifelong resident of Worcester, a homeowner here for 20 years. I also own a business that has been located in Worcester since its founding in 1949, and I am an owner of commercial property here for 16 years. In the annual tax classification debate, I am one of the few who pay both residential and commercial/industrial property taxes directly. I have watched over the years when the city has generally kept the residential tax rates at, or near, the minimum and have seen the commercial/industrial tax base shrink. Some of that is due to economic forces outside of the city’s control. But I believe that the erosion of the commercial/industrial base has been affected by the efforts of past councils to keep the residential rate at, or near, minimum.

My commercial property is a mix of office and retail. My business occupies about 25% of the space and the rest is rented out. The tax burden is shared among all occupants of the property through our lease agreements. I can assure you that any increase in the tax bill has an impact on my business and on each of my tenants. The notion that a business can always find a way to pay an increased cost is absolutely false (a few years ago, one of my tenants had to sell his business when he received his share of the new tax bill for this property. He had not accounted for a sizeable increase in the tax bill, so his business plan “blew up” and he could no longer operate).

As a homeowner, I also know the impact of paying higher taxes—we either increase our income or cut our expenses in order to pay it. This is exactly what a business owner has to do. And a business owner’s ability to increase income or reduce expenses is just as difficult as it is for the homeowner.

To me, the issue with tax classification is finding a balance that will create an environment where the commercial/industrial tax base grows. The only hope for me as a homeowner is for the commercial/industrial base to grow—if it continues to shrink, homeowners like [myself] will be forced to pay the bulk of the cost to run this city.

I believe the actions taken in recent tax classifications to reduce the gap between the residential tax rate and the commercial/industrial tax rate are helping to create an environment where the commercial/industrial base will grow. But it will take time for this to happen—just as it took time to get us where we are now after years of “residential minimum” tax classifications.

I urge you to support Line 191 in the next tax classification hearing which will continue to improve the overall tax base growth of our city. It is a fair and equitable sharing of the tax burden.

Thank you for your consideration.

Jack Woods
22 Brookshire Rd.
20 Park Ave.

—Tax Classification: Mooradian...Russell...Murray...Economou...Crowell

FROM PAGE 2

said. “You’ve got residents” who think the Council’s decision “will save them money, but every time a business closes it hurts residents.” How can some councilors not see that the loss of companies like R&R Plumbing, Kesselli & Morse, Charles Manoog Plumbing and S&S Equipment (the latter moved to Auburn) is a blow, Mr. Mooradian asks. “All the wholesale is leaving Worcester. I order material from Koopman Lumber,” he said, adding, “don’t look for Koopman Lumber to open a location in Worcester” when the company can operate its seven stores around the state from a less expensive main office in Whitinsville.

“Every time you turn around you have someone ready to eat your lunch. To be in business in Worcester you have to be a survivor.”
—ARTHUR MOORADIAN

Terming Council’s decision “extremely short-sighted” in refusing to “face the music” of “the laptop and the I phone” affording businesses the option of working remotely if they choose to do so, Mr. Mooradian, whose holdings include properties on Chandler St., Piedmont St., Park Ave. and Main St., said the Worcester business community is being hammered on all sides—from a preponderance of non-profits that “can come to Worcester at a bargain rate” to “a \$534 annual sprinkler charge that’s just a cash cow,” to city government overspending by \$13 million (“how does that happen”) to “a very aggressive fire-prevention department that sticks it to small shops. It’s a lot of little things” that add up to an

anti-business climate.

“Every time you turn around you have some ready to eat your lunch,” he said. “To be in business in Worcester you have to be a survivor.”

District 3 Councilor George Russell, who sided with the majority, said in the days prior to the vote, “it’s pretty clear what’s going on. The business community comes along and says ‘give us a break.’ This year the argument is on the other side. Commercial rates down, residential stable or a little up. Is the assessor wrong? So far no one has told me he is. I asked the assessor for a chart, residential/business rate. Residential rate was up about one-third, the commercial rate

“What’s a guy to do?” District 3 Councilor George Russell says a primarily residential constituent base dictated his vote favoring the homeowner.



was down a couple of dollars. Even though there is an argument to narrow the gap, at the expense of who? What (District 1 Councilor) Tony (Economou) set down, I haven’t seen his numbers. You don’t have to be Colombo to figure out many commercial properties” are facing “nothing like the many times higher” tax rates he says will occur.

To this appraisal from Mr. Russell, the Chamber’s Mr. Murray said “some people believe in global warming, some believe in Big Foot.”

In defending the vote he would take, Mr. Russell said “folks in my district are primarily residential. They don’t have a lobbyist, anyone to advocate for them.

“The real story is recently we’re having soft growth on the commercial side. The biggest slap in the face” in this regard, Mr. Russell said, is “sewer hookup fees,” costing a duplex “almost \$10,000,” or the tab for conversion “of an old warehouse to a restaurant \$39,000. That is stunting growth. How could you want to do that even without putting a shovel in the ground?”

Joan Crowell of the homeowner-support group AWARE, who sits on a committee addressing tax classification (which Councilor Economou hopes will be able to “pick low-hanging fruit” resulting in progress toward a better structure), said, “nobody was a winner in this particular case. I hope the Chamber will try to encourage the small-commercial exemption. We have been trying to promote that for years. If the Chamber would put effort into that it would make a big difference for small business. You have to analyze it every year. One year we were more favorable to the business community because their assessments had increased so dramatically; 2017 is an evaluation year so the figures will have to be looked at. There is no comparison as some contend,” Ms. Crowell said, to small neighboring towns that have a single rate or lower rates. “We’re the second largest city in New England. Worcester is a good address.”

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BONUS DRAWING:

\$25 12/06/15 Betty Vigliatura (#139); \$25 12/06/15 Leo & Mary Lamanuzzi (#135); \$25 12/06/15 Edward Stefanini (#116); \$25 12/16/15 Cindy Bourgault (#46); \$50 12/16/15 George Duquette (#107); \$74 12/16/15 Yvette Prosser (#55); \$150 12/16/15 Louise McGee (#104); \$250 12/16/15 Theresa Bouckaert (#112).

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THE NEIGHBORHOODS

No end to Chamber’s voyage of Discovery



Ms. Andreoli.

SHREWSBURY ST.—It would be easy to look at the creation of the newly minted travel and tourism-oriented agency “Discover Central Massachusetts” as a power grab on the part of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce. Some would say that since Tim Murray took over as president/CEO the Chamber has demonstrated a more ravenous appetite for building its prestige than even a Monopoly master does in buttressing his wealth by gobbling up railroads and high-end addresses like Park Place.

There are those in the community who are probably shaking their heads while thinking “here’s the former boy mayor flexing his muscles” by having the Chamber add to its multitude of programs and events in stepping into the vacuum left by the unfortunate demise of the Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB). The state money, the geographic reach, the impact that the CVB once held firmly in its grasp now shifts to 446 Main St., Suite 200; into the lap of Mr. Murray’s capable VP, Christina Andreoli.



Ms. Andreoli is thinking big as Discover Central Massachusetts undertakes stewardship of the previously struggling “Destination Worcester” apparatus’ marketing and sales program including developing strategies that will focus on pitching the city to event and meeting planners and sports and convention organizers—”thereby filling hotel rooms and venue spaces.” A brand identity and website are in development for DCM.

In a prepared statement accompanying official word from Troy Siebels, president of The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts, that Discover Central Massachusetts is on the launch pad, Ms. Andreoli said “the combined spending at hotels, restaurants, local attractions and shops by visitors to Central Massachusetts generates more than \$600 million for our region’s economy. The region is already

host to premiere events, world-renowned attractions and entertainment, but there is opportunity and great potential to bring in more visitors, event planners and businesses to further enliven the region.”

Paul Barber of The Flying Rhino Café and Watering Hole, who sits on DCM’s twenty eight member-strong board, says the new entity will surpass the CVB’s accomplishments because Discover Central Massachusetts “differs dramatically” from its predecessor. “It’s more inclusive,” Mr. Barber said. “Right now it’s about building relationships, not about the money. It has potential to grow. The CVB hasn’t been engaging and living up to its charter.

“I think the feeling in the room is very good, bringing together the whole region. Seems like the right thing to do. I was also (involved with) Destination Worcester. We all have a similar purpose. It’s better to work together. I think that’s one of our advantages.”

Mr. Barber sees Discover CM as enhancing The Flying Rhino’s attractiveness, which is already well-established with its reputation for a “hip, eclectic, colorful” atmosphere and stellar international cuisine.”

“We have a great big little city, a small-town ‘let’s get it together’ [purposefulness]. We can be better than Providence and Boston. Event planners will see that. We are under one roof, under one big

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THE NEIGHBORHOODS

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CHANDLER ST.—Whatever misgivings were generated by the way the South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) ran the old PIP shelter in Main South—an admittedly tough proposition to begin with—has been eliminated with the support the Framingham-



based organization is providing to the Chandler St. Business Association.

From maintaining the CSBA's trash barrels on Chandler St. to helping finance the Association's Summer Youth Employment Program, SMOC is going above and beyond its core mission, which is to improve the quality of life of low-income individuals and families in a multi-faceted manner, Paul Collyer of BA Events said in announcing that SMOC would be presented with the CSBA's first-ever "Neighborhood Appreciation Award."

The honor was bestowed on December 10th at a CSBA Christmas party at Chuan Shabu on Park Ave.

SMOC's ties to the Association are reflected too in the care it is now providing to the lot that was the home of the V.I.P. Lounge at Murray and Chandler streets until that disco venue was torn down. The Association took control of the property in 2012, now dubbed "Mo Mooradian Park," after Mooradian Real Estate and other members of the CSBA did the site work; "100% community-driven, paid for and maintained by the CSBA, Mr. Collyer said.



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NOTES ON A NAPKIN

Scrooge, Marley, Cratchit and Siebels • Mike True ‘s new home • Mr. Moughan on the Trump crowd • The Economou family and the NWBA’s holiday spirit • Canal’ers’ “missed opportunity”

Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” is one of those stories that never gets old. But in freshening the tale with his adaptation of the classic, **Troy Siebels**, president of The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts, managed to create a version that is equally compelling. Bravo! While the nimble **Jeremy Lawrence** lived up to the advance hype surrounding his role by nailing the character of “Ebenezer Scrooge” (complete with bounces on his bed, in his stocking cap), the entire cast, including **Marc Geller, Tori Heinlein, Bryan T. Donovan, Cameron Levesque** and **Lily Riley** as ghosts and spirits, kept the audience enthralled throughout the Saturday-night version of the production. The sets, too, with buildings and fog that evoked the London of yesteryear, were brilliantly constructed. That theater goers were in a generous mood even before witnessing the flinty Scrooge’s change of heart from miser to philanthropic do-gooder was apparent in Mr. Siebels’ call for donations of \$10 or more to The Hanover’s Education Fund to encourage and develop young people who are interested in careers in entertainment. By intermission the total raised for this purpose, dropped into buckets passed by ushers, had climbed from approximately \$1300 to \$1900-plus. The original transformed Scrooge would have approved... Imagine our surprise in coming across **Mike True** at the Goddard House, where he has lived for several months. “Very happy here,” Mr. True said, while encamped in the dining room during the home’s holiday social—cordially hosted by **Joan Cusson** and **Tracey King**. For the uninformed, Mr. True is one of the city’s most illustrious citizens; an author, co-founder of the Worcester County Poetry Association, founding editor of The Worcester Review, co-founder of the Center for Nonviolent Solutions and professor emeritus at Assumption College... The DCU Center’s **Jim Moughan** had an inkling that presidential candidate Donald Trump’s recent appearance on Foster St. would draw a huge crowd. At first, a little after 4:00 p.m. the afternoon of the rally, he said, “only a trickle,” but I mentioned to a colleague “wait.” Sure enough, that ebb quickly turned into “the largest line we’ve ever had for an event. It definitely gets the blood boiling...” “God bless you” was the most common expression of gratitude heard from residents of Colony Retirement Homes on Grove St. after they were provided with food baskets by the North Worcester Business Association, a longstanding tradition spearheaded by District 1 City Councilor **Tony Economou** and his family... That the Canal District through **Mullen Sawyer** and his cohorts is now engaged in a wooing of the PawSox in the hope of having the team occupy a ball park



Bah humbug!—NOT.



Enjoying the convivial atmosphere at the Goddard House’s holiday social are, above, Residents **Mary Emma Weir** and **Michael True** and, left, **Chris Salter, Tom Rouvina** and **Jim Eaton**.

on the former Wyman Gordon property on Madison St. seems like a turn in the right direction from Canal’ers earlier pitch for a casino at the site—given word that Plainridge Park (the Commonwealth’s first such gambling mecca) has proven to be something of a bust. “A slots parlor—that just doesn’t cut it anymore,” BC Professor **Richard McGowan** told the Boston Sunday Globe. “Plainridge is going after 60-year-olds, 70-year-olds, 80-year-olds. It’s a nice little crowd to go after, but it’s certainly limited.” Just goes to show that Canal’ers missed opportunity may have been a blessing in disguise. As possibly would be a failure to get the PawSox. Maybe the parcel was intended for a better, yet-to-be-determined use than either of those prospects. A Quincy Market-type venture?



Elizabeth Lufkin, after receiving a food basket from the NWBA

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CITY FOLK



Party central. That no one parties like Ed Bourgaunt and the North Worcester Business Association was fully apparent with the organization's annual holiday social at O'Connor's, where scads of money was raised for the distribution of food baskets to shut-ins by District 1 Councilor Tony Economou's family—and helpers. Enjoying the festivities, below, are Peter Rovezzi and Brian Moore of Country Bank and Bob Brooks of Ford's Hometown Services. NWBA Treasurer Neil Brosnan is shown calling out the numbers of raffle-prize winners.



All I want... Councilor Rivera, State Rep. Campanale, Councilor Rosen, John Reed and Paul White from the Alhambra Council K of C, yours truly and of course Santa himself (Mr. Sherman from South High) greeted a crowd of between 200-300 for the Webster Square Business Association's annual holiday tree-lighting ceremonies on December 1st.



Above, Bay State Savings SVP Commercial Lending Steve Groccia, Head Teller Michelle Swiderski, Assistant Manager Patricia Gonon and AVP Branch Manager Lemonia Miriondis enjoy a networking cocktail event at the bank's office on Mill St.



Left, Gina Betti of WPI and the Worcester Business Resource Alliance (WBRA) describes the organization as "a think tank really" at a luncheon meeting of the Webster Square Business Association at Eller's Restaurant.

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THE ECHO CHAMBER

Dave Peterson

“Keep up the good work. Good to see Donna (Colorio) back on the School Committee too. I had a chance to meet her at a fundraiser for Brad Wyatt two years ago after she was voted out. She had several great ideas, so it’s good to see her back in that spot.”

Brian O’Connell

“Excellent edition, with a fine tribute to Donna Colorio, who will be again be an energetic, dedicated and incisive presence on our

School Committee.”

John Monfredo

“Good edition as usual. Interesting story on Donna (Colorio) and we’ll see where that goes next month. Yes, Maureen (Binienda) is a viable candidate for superintendent!”

Tony Economou

“I just want to thank you for the commentary on the stance I took last night. It’s not enough to just take a vote to take the vote. New information came to light and I exercised my right to hold the item so we can all digest it.”

SHOWTIME!

Reasons to ‘Stomp’ and shout, at The Hanover

Safe to say **The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts** is kicking it up and then some for the start of 2016 with “Stomp” (1/10), “Classic Albums Live Presents: Fleetwood Mac—Rumours!(1/22) and then “Ragtime The Musical” for three

Ragtime The Musical, coming to The Hanover.



dates (1/29-31) to close out the month. In regard to the latter: can being a thirteen-time Tony Award nominee with such laudatory endorsements as these—”one of the best musicals in years” (Hollywood Reporter) and “explosive and thrilling, theater-shaking intensity...a vibrant production” (Bloomberg News)—be misguided? We don’t think so! The story line itself is compelling: an upper-class wife, a determined Jewish immigrant and a daring young Harlem musician united by their desire and belief in a brighter tomorrow, set at the turn of the century in New York City. With a rousing score by Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens, Ragtime has proven to be as good as advertised...As if “Flora in Winter” (1/28-31) wasn’t enough of a reason to visit the **Worcester Art Museum**, there is the most unusual “Hassan Hajjaj” My Rock Stars” exhibition in the Contemporary Gallery through March 6th: a video installation by the Moroccan-born UK-based artist with a related series of photographs

paying tribute to individuals who though not necessarily famous have inspired him. Included are nine filmed performances by a group of musicians and singers whose influences range from hip hop and jazz to traditional North African spiritual songs by descendants of enslaved West Africans (pictured at right is “Mr. Toliver, 2010,” by Hassan Hajjaj, a metallic lambda print on 3mm white dibond)...Among the most requested titles at the moment at the **Worcester Public Library** are “Rogue Lawyer” by the indefatigable John Grisham, “Tricky Twenty Two” (Janet Evanovich), “The Guilty” (David Baldacci), “Cross Justice” (James Atkinson) and “The Crossing” (Michael Connelly). Do we notice a theme here? Check out the library’s new website: mywpl.org...



The faint of heart be forewarned: “The Arctic Next Door: Mount Washington” now featured at the **Ecotarium** exposes visitors to some of New England’s wildest weather patterns and the geology of the White Mountains; for the more intrepid, don’t miss a chance to enter a phone booth-sized hurricane simulator to experience the sound and fury of Category 1-force gales!...Much ado about something is the buzz at the **DCU Center** with “Get Ready for the Garth Experience” booked (2/27-29, with Tricia Yearwood) but fans of UMass Boston-based WUMB 91.9 FM would undoubtedly be just as excited knowing that The Avett Brothers are also coming to Foster St. (4/10). An American folk rock band from Mount Pleasant, North Carolina, the group has been described by the San Francisco Chronicle as having “the heavy sadness of Townes Van Zandt, the light pop concision of Buddy Holly, the tuneful jangle of The Beatles and the raw energy of The Ramones.”... Lunch out, anyone? Kate Campanale, first-term 17th Worcester District state rep from Leicester, is tentatively scheduled as guest speaker for the Webster Square Business Association’s monthly meeting (1/13) at **Livia’s Dish**, and Dennis and Lois Melican of the American Chestnut Association are on deck for the North Worcester Business Association’s January sitdown (1/20) at **O’Connor’s**...Right around the corner at **Mechanics Hall**, the Winter Holiday Soiree (1/23) and The Band of the Royal Marines & the Pipes, Drums (1/26) followed by Worcester’s Best Chef Competition (1/31).