

Opacum Land Trust touts achievements at Annual Meeting

STURBRIDGE — This spring, the Opacum Land Trust gathered once more with members and supporters at the Annual Meeting Breakfast. The Pandemic impacted all of us, including the land trust as it struggled to bring conservation-minded people together during trying times. This event was truly a breath of fresh air for the land trust and their supporters.

Laney Wilder, the land trust's new Executive Director, provided an eager audience with updates on Opacum Land Trust's work in our local region while folks enjoyed a tasty breakfast at the Hamilton Rod and Gun Club. Throughout the morning attendees mingled, bid on raffle prizes, discussed with board members the land trust's spring fundraiser, and enjoyed a lovely walk through the adjacent Plimpton Community Forest. This was the first big event for Laney, who joined the Opacum team in April 2021, and the warm welcome from Opacum's supporters was felt by all.

Many dynamic programs and projects are happening at Opacum Land Trust. They are managing a large federal grant to plant 1,000 trees in Southbridge, with free trees to residents. A second federal grant awarded to Opacum Land Trust in 2021 is the Forest Legacy Program, protecting over 1,000 acres in our region by working with private landowners. These grants complement the extensive work Opacum is doing to acquire beautiful forested properties with future public trails, and care for their existing properties with the help of many dedicated trail volunteers. To date, Opacum Land Trust has protected over 2,200 acres of natural lands in their 13-town service area in your local towns. While Opacum continues to work with local landowners to protect and care for their forests, Opacum's work is not limited to forested areas. The Land Trust is also helping local farmers keep their land in farming. Opacum Land Trust also provides educational, guided walks

on their properties with experts on botany, forestry, insects, birds, local history, and more for those who enjoy the outdoors and are interested in other important aspects of conserved land.

What you can do to join the movement

Opacum Land Trust welcomes all to join the movement in protecting the wild places and natural spaces you love in your community.

Individual membership and Planned Giving

As a member of Opacum Land Trust, you will be connected to our ongoing conservation work, programs, and volunteer opportunities. Opacum also accepts planned giving of land or assets, however you would like to charitably donate to protecting land.

Resource for land conservation and care

Opacum has helped many landowners conserve and care for their land and forests. Always willing to work with your plan for your land, Opacum can connect you to resources to care for your land and find

grant funds to help pay for all of this.

Business Sponsors
Opacum continues to gain the support of and partner with local businesses to strengthen community investment in land conservation. A great way to connect charitable land protection work with local businesses you know and trust.

Volunteer!
Opacum Land Trust is always looking for vol-

unteers to help on the trails or in other dynamic ways. Please reach out and see what you can do to help on the trails or in the office.

Opacum Land Trust is a regional, non-profit land conservation organization protecting land for wildlife, forestry, farming, water, and outdoor recreation. We work in a 13-town region stretching from eastern Hampden County and

southwestern Worcester County in the towns between Monson and Charlton. Founded in 2000, Opacum currently protects over 2,200 acres of land and is actively working to protect more land across the service area. Reach out to us at Opacum Land Trust, PO Box 233, Sturbridge, MA 01566; 508-347-9144, and visit the website for news and events at www.OpacumLT.org.

QCC hosts third virtual legislative town hall

WORCESTER — Administrators, students and staff from Quinsigamond Community College (QCC) recently gathered with area legislators for the third virtual Legislative Town Hall, to showcase the innovative programs and community impact that QCC has provided to its students and the region. Moderated by Student Government Association President Shauna Connelly, the Town Hall focused on increased supports for students and a new program designed to encourage and support more people to enter the biomanufacturing industry pipeline.

This entry-level Biomanufacturing On-Ramp program offers entry-level technician positions, in partnership with Mass. Biomedical Initiatives (MBI) and the Mass. Office of Business Development (MOBD), and biopharmaceutical company AbbVie. A 10-week pilot program was launched in the Fall 2021, which included a group of English Language Learners (ELL) from QCC's Adult Community Learning Center. Additional spring programs have also taken place. A recent graduate of the inaugural program, Lorena Hoxhalli, an immigrant from Albania, described the impact of the program.

"We took a lot from the program - knowledge, friends, confidence, and hope. I'm so happy that I was able to be a part of that program," said Ms. Hoxhalli, who was offered a position at AbbVie after going through the workshop.

Another program making an impact on students is QCC's SUCCESS program, which enhances student engagement through wraparound support services for historically underserved groups such as low-income students, students of color, and disabled students. The program is funded by the state SUCCESS Grant in partnership with the Mass. Association of Community Colleges, with the goal of empowering the most vulnerable community college students using a holistic, developmental advising model.

"I've managed to outgrow a shell of suffocating constraint and really shine at QCC, thanks to the help of advisors and staff. I've gained so much more confidence navigating the systems of higher education, and I feel comfortable reaching out and advocating for myself when I need something," said QCC student Haley LaFortune, who has taken advantage of the program.

Representative Mary Keefe noted the impact the College is having on the communities it serves.

"After coming through this difficult time, I think what I appreciate the most is the relational commitment of all of you to your students and being able to create that atmosphere of belonging. It's a great thing what our community colleges do and especially Quinsigamond, our Worcester community college," Representative Keefe said.

QCC President Luis G. Pedraja, Ph.D. praised legislators for their support of the City's only community college.

"You're our greatest cheerleaders. We appreciate the support that you offer us day in and day out. I think it's essential for the state to continue to invest in higher education and particularly in community college students who stay in our communities and are the heart of our communities," he said.

Other new achievements have included \$2.5 million of QCC's institutional portion of the Federal Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds that the College put toward a student debt forgiveness program; a partnership with the Central MA Agency on Aging to offer free dental services to local seniors; an expansion of the Brothers & Keepers Club, which offers mentorship for men of color into a full-time program, and an increase in services at the College's Counseling and Wellness Office.

Additionally, QCC's HomePlate Food Pantry and Resource Center has more than doubled in size and now has a state-of-the-art electronic software system that enables students to select prepackaged baskets of food, as well as diapers and hygiene products in a safe, contact-free way. The HomePlate Food Pantry and Resource Center has also partnered with local organizations to offer housing resources, legal aid, SNAP benefits, and nutritional workshops.

"It really strikes me how you (QCC) focused on ensuring the students' success over the last two years, not your own success as a college, but making sure that the students who rely on you so much are cared for and it shows your dedication to the people," said Rep. McKenna.

Attending the event were area State Representatives Natalie Higgins, Mary Keefe, David LeBoeuf, Joseph McKenna and James O'Day.

For more information on QCC, contact Karen Hutner, Interim Director of Institutional Communications at 508-854-2842 or khutner@qcc.mass.edu.

Water & Sewer Commission approves 2 percent sewer rate increase

BY JASON BLEAU CONTRIBUTOR

CHARLTON — The Charlton Water & Sewer Commission finalized and approved a 2 percent sewer rate increase during a public hearing on May 10.

The hearing, which was livestreamed on Zoom, received no public input either during the discussion itself or through written correspondence leading the commission to approve the increase with no opposition. The move should come as no surprise to anyone who has followed the Water & Sewer Commission's meetings over the last six months. Water & Sewer Superintendent Peter Boria proposed a sewer rate study in December of 2021 and members proposed the actual increase in March of 2022. The increase will be in effect for the 2023 Fiscal Year.

With no public comments, commissioners had little to say however Commissioner Russ Jennings repeated similar warnings posed in prior meetings, that if the smaller increase wasn't implemented now then larger

increases would be required later:

"I think naturally, this commission is always very frugal and very considerate of the taxpayers. I think everything around us has gone up. Naturally the cost has gone up for us as well and if we don't make these little slight increases along the way what potentially can happen is we'll all of a sudden hit a major bump in the road where we have to jack it up 12 percent and then there will be a lot of people at this hearing," Jennings said. "The slight increase, we all adapt to it. No one likes increase taxes. I'm the last person who ever wants to do so. This is a service as a tax, but it's definitely warranted and needed at this time in my estimation."

With that the public hearing was closed and the increase called to a vote. The commissioners present, Jennings and Cameron Coleman, voted in favor of the increase. Commissioner David Cantwell recused himself from the official vote arguing that he is a sewer rate payer, however he did unofficially confirm his support for the increase. Commissioner Jack Rydlak was not present for the meeting.

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Take-out Orders Welcome for Lunch & Dinner

Just a few of our regular menu selections...

Lunch - Fri. and Sat. 11:30-2:00 Sandwiches (all served w/ chips & pickle) Choice of Ham, Turkey, or Roast Beef Veal Parmesan w/Pasta & Garlic Bread Hamburger Platter w/ French Fries Chicken Parmesan with Pasta and Garlic Bread Baked Haddock w/ Potato and Vegetable Broiled Sirloin Steak with Potato and vegetable	Dinner - Fri. and Sat. 5:00-Close; All Dinner entrees served with salad, potato, & vegetable Duck au Grand Manier Prime Rib - Choice Cut - Fridays & Saturdays Queen/King Broiled Fresh Swordfish Surf & Turf... Petite filet and three stuffed jumbo shrimp Shrimp Scampi Salmon-Baked, Broiled or Cajun
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