

SOUTHBRIDGE NEWS

Established 1923

Thursday, August 26, 2021

Newsstand: 50 cents

Baker defends stance on school mask policies

BY KEVIN FLANDERS
STAFF WRITER

REGION – Facing increased pressure as the school year looms and the Delta variant spreads, Gov. Charlie Baker recently defended current policies.

During a press conference on Aug. 16, Baker said there are no imminent plans to alter masking recommendations statewide. Even with the nation's steady rise in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations over the last month, Baker believes Massachusetts is in a far better position than other states in the battle against the virus.

"I'm not considering changing the mask guidance at this time. We pay a lot of attention to the data associated

with case counts, hospitalizations, and the tragic loss of life," Baker said. "The fact that so many people in Massachusetts have been vaccinated has put us in a dramatically different place than many other states across this country."

Baker also supported the joint decision from the state's Department of Public Health and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to leave masking policies up to individual school districts for the fall of 2021.

Statewide, each school committee has voted on policies that will determine how to address the highly contagious Delta variant in the classroom this fall. Information on policies has

been mailed out to families.

"Giving the locals the opportunity to own the decisions they make is a big and important issue," Baker said. "If you look at what has played out in other states where the government has taken away the authority for locals to make their own decisions, that's not the right way to play this game."

Several local students, parents, and educators agree with the Governor's current handling of the Delta variant. Others fear that his hands-off approach is a dangerous gamble. As of last week, every county in the Commonwealth had reached a threshold of COVID-19 transmission

that automatically triggers a CDC recommendation for public indoor masking, regardless of vaccination status.

During his Aug. 16 press conference, Baker reiterated his recommendation that students in grades K-6 continue to wear masks indoors.

"We've made a very strong recommendation to our colleagues in K-6 education. Because there is not a vaccine currently available for that population, we recommend that those kids should be masked up until they have an opportunity to be vaccinated," Baker said.

State officials also recommend that

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Selectmen set Sept. 13 date for horse park hearing

BY GUS STEEVES
CORRESPONDENT

STURBRIDGE — Economic development in various forms dominated the last selectmen's meeting, with the bulk of it focused on a 200-acre equine center proposed to be tucked between I-84 and Breakneck Road.

Although in the works for about two years, the project has barely begun in an official sense. Selectmen sent the proponents' zoning overlay district to the Planning Board for review and public

hearing, while setting Sept. 13 for their own hearing on whether they should accept the concept at that location. If approved, both hearings will lead into a Town Meeting vote in October.

Key proponent Richard Fields said he sees the project as being a "family-oriented horse park" with "three silos." One is a mile-long thoroughbred race track that will feature about 10 races a year; 10 more "festival activities that are horse related," and 100 jobs. He estimated it

will draw 3-5,000 people per race, with nearly 90 percent of the site's income coming from online betting by people in their own homes.

The project, Fields noted, "cannot go forward without sports betting," referring specifically to a bill now in the Legislature to legalize it in general. It passed the House, but a somewhat different version (one lacking the approval of college betting the House had) is now in the Senate.

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Geraldo Maldonado

Local resident to lead QCC at Southbridge

SOUTHBRIDGE — Quinsigamond Community College at Southbridge has named local resident Geraldo Maldonado as its new Site Leader.

Mr. Maldonado is a long-time QCC adjunct faculty member, alumnus, and is one of 50 QCC Guardians. Guardians are alumni of the college who have made significant strides in their personal life and in their community.

"I'm excited to welcome students to our Southbridge location this fall. It's truly incredible to have QCC in Southbridge. It's a needed element for the community," Mr. Maldonado said. "While people sometimes still think of QCC as the campus in Worcester, we have full services right in Southbridge at QCC's new location in the Southbridge High School."

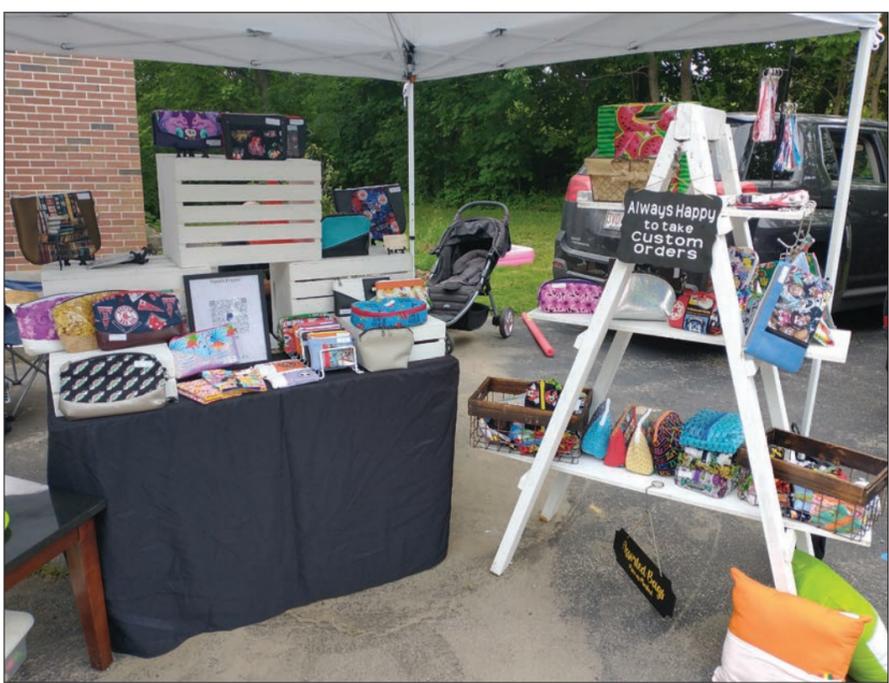
For the past 15 years, QCC has had a presence in the Southbridge community. In the summer of 2020, QCC's Southbridge location moved from 5 Optical Dr. as a way to offer greater access to higher education not only to Southbridge,

but also to all communities in the South County area. Additionally, Southbridge High School students now have easy access to QCC's Early College Program and their family members can also take advantage of the college's academic and workforce development offerings.

Mr. Maldonado and his family have a long and storied history with QCC and Southbridge. Born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, he and his family moved to Lowell when he was six before moving to Worcester three years later. In the '70's, his mother began attending QCC, where she took English classes and earned her GED. This began a family legacy with the college, and when Mr. Maldonado was in his late 20's and a parent, he too began taking classes at QCC.

"It was a little scary coming back to school as an adult with children. I was working a full-time job, a part-time job, and taking two to three classes per semester," he said. "I need-

Please Read **QCC**, page **A13**



LADIES AUXILIARY OF QUINEBAUG LODGE TO HOST CRAFT MARKET

Photo Courtesy

On Sunday, Aug. 29, the Ladies Auxiliary of Quinebaug Masonic Lodge, located on Route 131 at 339 Ashland Ave. in Southbridge, will be hosting a Craft Market from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. This Craft Market offers a great opportunity to find all kinds of unique gifts and crafts for your home or anyone on your shopping list. Everything from hand sewn items, crochet items, candles, signs, soaps, jewelry, active wear, kids and women's clothing and much, much more. All Covid-19 Guidelines would

be greatly appreciated.

Some Vendors including, but not limited to are, Little Hearts Custom Creations, Norah's Fabric Creations,

SOR Creations, Matilda Jane, Jackson's Creative Cakes and Crafts, Nicole Singer Arts. If you are interested in setting up a tent display and would like more details of space availability and setup information or have any questions or concerns, please contact Norah Proper at 1-413-297-8374 or e-mail her at norahsfabriccreations@yahoo.com.

UMass Memorial Health-Harrington welcomes new hematologist/oncologist

SOUTHBRIDGE — Andrei Bandarchuk, MD has joined UMass Memorial Health

Harrington, providing Hematology/Oncology care at The Cancer Center at Harrington, located in Southbridge.

Dr. Bandarchuk brings more than 20 years of broad medical experience to The Cancer Center at Harrington, having specialized in Internal Medicine, General Surgery and Hematology/Oncology.

Dr. Bandarchuk treats patients with cancer as well as anemia and bleeding and clotting disorders. He is also experienced in performing bone marrow biopsies.

Most recently, Dr. Bandarchuk provided Hematology/Oncology care to patients at MetroWest Medical Center – Framingham Union Hospital in Framingham,

Massachusetts. Prior to that, he served as Chief Fellow of the Department of Hematology/Oncology and Chief Resident and Attending Physician in the Department of Internal Medicine at Brookdale Hospital Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York.

Dr. Bandarchuk is Board Certified in Hematology/

Medical Oncology and Internal Medicine, and is a member of the American Society of Hematology, American Society of Clinical Oncology and the American College of Physicians. He received his medical degree from Belarusian State Medical University in Belarus

Please Read **BANDARCHUCK**, page **A4**



QCC announces Super Saturday registration event

WORCESTER — Quinsigamond Community College is hosting two "Super Saturday" registration events before the fall semester begins on Sept. 8.

An in-person "Super Saturday" event will be held on Saturday, Aug. 28, at QCC's Welcome Center, 670 West Boylston St., Worcester, from 9 a.m. – 1 p.m. Students can save time waiting in line by scheduling an appointment through the College's new virtual waiting line service, Easy Queue (EZQ), www.QCC.edu/EZQ.

"These events are designed for

students who are unable to register during the week, or who prefer to get their registration needs taken care of remotely," said QCC President Luis G. Pedraja, Ph.D. "At QCC, we are doing everything possible to remove barriers that prevent students from attaining a higher education."

To learn more about QCC's Super Saturday events, visit www.QCC.edu/saturday

For more information about QCC, contact Josh Martin, Director of Institutional Communications at 508-854-7513 or jmartin@qcc.mass.edu.

drugging animals or selling them to slaughterhouses, and has bought "many" to rehabilitate them and "find new homes for them."

Fields' attorney Robert George said the zoning overlay they're proposing specifically excludes putting slot machines or a casino there. His partner Karen Davis noted it's "a very complicated project. We've hit a lot of bumps in the road," but are willing to work with the town to ensure the broader community benefits.

Town Counsel Jonathan Silverstein of KP Law said he provided the board with recommended changes to the proposed host community agreement, but it's still in draft form. The next step would be to bring in a peer-review consultant to look at the business model, economic impact reports and related issues, with Silverstein recommending one he's worked with and noting the proponents have expressed willingness to fund it. The board approved that recommendation, setting a price cap of \$25,000 on it.

QCC

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ed the flexibility QCC offered."

In 1995, he graduated with an Associate Degree in Business Administration Transfer, going on to earn a Bachelor's degree from Worcester State University and a Master of Business Administration from Anna Maria College.

His daughters also are QCC alumnae. His older daughter Kristina decided to do the paramedic program at QCC, while his younger daughter Aimee took a longer journey to QCC. She began at UMass Lowell as an Engineering major; however, it was not a good fit and she struggled.

"She took a couple of Business classes at Lowell and seemed to do OK," Mr. Maldonado said. "She came home, still not sure what she was going to do and I suggested she take classes at QCC in Southbridge due to its very convenient location."

His daughter Aimee took classes for a year at QCC's Southbridge location where she excelled. She graduated with her Associate Degree in Business and went on to Nichols College where she received scholarships based on

her high grades. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Accounting and her Masters in Accounting, before attending Penn State Dickenson Law. In 2020, she graduated with her law degree, passed the Bar Exam on her first attempt by scoring in the 99th percentile, and today works in the District Attorney's Office in Hampden County.

"Definitely a very good Quinsigamond success story," he said.

Having the Southbridge location at Southbridge High School opens many doors for students and the community, according to Mr. Maldonado.

"This benefits high school students who can see firsthand how accessible college can be and they can take advantage of the Early College Program. Instead of taking college equivalent classes students can actually take college classes for college credit," he said. "I hope that people will see QCC at Southbridge as the college of choice for the Southwest corner of Worcester County."

To learn more visit www.QCC.edu/Southbridge.

For more information on QCC, contact Josh Martin, Director of Institutional Communications at 508-854-7513 or jmartin@qcc.mass.edu.

HORSE PARK

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Either way, the Gaming Commission has set an Oct. 1 deadline for new applicants.

The second "silo" is agriculture. Fields aims to start an Agriculture in the Classroom program, community garden, beekeeping site, horse therapy, horse riding lessons and a biodigester turning farm and restaurant waste into energy.

"Part of the issue we have in our society now is that we have lost our connection with the dirt," he said.

The third part will be collaboration with the town to promote other recreation. He said he's willing to contribute \$1.5 million to athletic field redevelopment, but will also have recreational space on his property. To him, the goal is to make a place that is "quintessential Sturbridge, and something all of us will be proud of for generations to come."



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getting the green light from Town Meeting, with Chair Mary Blanchard dubbing "a little bit chicken and egg." She said she's seen letters opposing rezoning already.

Davis agreed the timing seems a little odd, but it's largely determined by the Gaming Commission.

She said, "We tried to make it so you don't have to take a leap of faith" with the proposed zoning change, and are simply asking the board whether using that site is acceptable. All of the other issues will still be addressed later."

In other business, Economic Development Director Terry Masterson summarized how covid impacted Sturbridge's economy but it's currently recovering. Between 2017 and 2019, the town annually saw about \$63 million in meals spending and \$17 million in hotel stays, but those dropped to about \$46 million and \$9 million last year, respectively, he said. This spring, however, saw both return to the older levels.

Additionally, he cited several projects in the works around town. Those include that Teddy G's recently bought the old Friendly's, the owner of the JC Penney site has found new ten-

ants for most of that space, and two cold-storage sites are under construction, as is the new Route 20 travel center, featuring an electric vehicle showroom and restaurant. But he noted the Cinemagic space is still vacant.

The board also continued discussing its concerns regarding two major Charlton projects (one of them an Amazon warehouse) with Attorney Art Kreiger. Kreiger said he thinks Sturbridge's best bet is to focus on widening Route 20, getting better lights and traffic signals, and otherwise ensuring it can handle more traffic. He didn't think the town would have standing to appeal whatever Charlton or the state Department of Transportation decides.

That prompted Dowling to ask if it might be possible to get MDOT to create a Mass Pike exit for the project, thus taking some traffic off Sturbridge roads. Kreiger said that'd be "a five-year proposition" he didn't see as being "in the cards" now, although it might be long-term.

Gus Steeves can be reached at gus.steeves2@gmail.com.

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