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Friday, August 27, 2021

Tantasqua awarded Skills Capital Grant

BY KEVIN FLANDERS
STAFF WRITER

STURBRIDGE – Tantasqua Regional Vocational High School is among several schools across the state to benefit from the Skills Capital Grant Program.

Last week, the Baker-Polito Administration announced \$9.7 million in Skills Capital Grant Program funding that will be awarded to 47 educational organizations statewide. The grants will help schools update equipment and expand student enrollment in programs that provide career education.



At TRHS, \$110,511 in grant funding will assist the school's culinary arts and hospitality program. The funding will be used to retool the TRHS kitchen for its culinary program and student-run restaurant. This will enable the school's facilities to match current industry standards and prepare students for cooperative education placements, as well as full-time employment in the region.

The funding will also benefit the general community. "The Tantasqua Technical Division is thrilled to have been awarded a Skills Capital Grant. This grant will help to update the equipment in the Cornerstone Cafe – both in the kitchen and the restaurant – in addition to allowing for some evening cooking classes for the public," said Mark Wood, the Technical Division Principal.

Director of TRHS.

This year's grant awards mark \$102 million in total funding provided to high schools, colleges, and other educational organizations since the program's inception in 2015.

"The Skills Capital Grants have helped give thousands of young people opportunities in high-demand jobs, and the grants have had a tremendous impact on students, schools, and local businesses," said Gov. Charlie Baker. "These significant investments made over the past six years in this program with our partners in the Legislature will help train students to adapt to the changing needs of our economy."

The Skills Capital Grant Program was originally

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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.

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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.

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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 longtime 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 QxCC,



Courtesy

Geraldo Maldonado

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 needed 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 Dickinson 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.

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launched in 2015 with the goal of replacing outdated equipment and technology, mainly at vocational technical high schools and community colleges. Since then, the program has evolved into a crucial component of local workforce training efforts by expanding the number of young people and adults trained and experienced with the newest technologies used by local employers. Approximately 40,000 students across the Commonwealth have directly benefited from these grants.

"Massachusetts, like the rest of the country, will face workforce challenges in the next few years, but we are poised to handle them better because of programs like the Skills Capital Grants," said Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito. "The grants enable schools, colleges, and other educational institutions to revamp how students learn and gain crucial experience that serves them and employers well."

The grants are awarded to educational institutions that demonstrate partnerships with local businesses and align their curriculums with industry demand to maximize hiring opportunities. This has made a big difference at local schools like TRHS, particularly its technical division.

"Gov. Baker and his administration created these grants years ago, and they are extremely helpful for smaller schools like the Tech Division," Principal Wood added. "Over the years, the Skills

Capital Grants have helped us bring state-of-the-art technology to our CAD Program, Health Assisting Program, Manufacturing Program, and now our Culinary Arts/Hospitality Programs. Our students have benefited from these grants, as they are able to train and learn on the most up-to-date technology available in their chosen field."

State officials also believe the program will greatly benefit the Commonwealth's worker shortage caused by COVID-19. Many industries continue to struggle to reach adequate staffing levels, and state leaders are focused on ushering in the next wave of workforce candidates.

"Training a skilled workforce is critical to the Commonwealth's economic recovery, and the Skills Capital Grants have been a vital component of our efforts to strengthen the talent pipelines for key industries," said Massachusetts Housing and Economic Development Secretary Mike Kennealy. "As we continue emerging from the economic damage inflicted by the pandemic, funding this program at this milestone level will significantly increase access to employment opportunities in every region of Massachusetts and accelerate progress toward recovery."

The Skills Capital Grants are awarded by Governor Baker's Workforce Skills Cabinet, which was created in 2015 to bring together leaders in education, workforce development, and economic development.

To learn more about the program, visit www.mass.gov.

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"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 unvaccinated students in grades seven and above, as well as unvaccinated staff members and visitors to schools, wear masks indoors. Additionally, any individual at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19, or with a household member who is at high risk, is encouraged to mask indoors regardless of vaccination status.

Looking ahead, Baker hopes the Commonwealth continues to serve as an example to states that are lagging behind with vaccinations.

"I hope that many other states move as aggressively as the people in Massachusetts have moved to get vaccinated," Baker said. "Vaccinations are the pathway out of this pandemic - period. I can't tell you how grateful I am that so many people see that and have gotten vaccinated."

As the start of school rapidly approaches, state officials continue to promote vaccine clinics for eligible students. Governor Baker said Massachusetts is a national leader among young people ages 12-19 getting vaccinated.

To learn more about the state's efforts to combat the virus, visit www.mass.gov.

MALDONADO
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"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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It passed the House, but a somewhat different version (one lacking the approval of college betting the House had) is now in the Senate. 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."

Later, when Selectman Mary Dowling raised concerns over the racing industry's generally poor treatment of horses, Fields leaned on his record as manager at Suffolk Downs. He said he had "zero tolerance" for 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 \$35,000 on it.

The board expressed a little uncertainty about doing these things before 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 tenants 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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