

Country Journal

Devoted to the Needs of the Hilltowns

Becket, Blandford, Chester, Chesterfield, Cummington, Goshen, Huntington, Middlefield, Montgomery, Otis, Plainfield, Russell, Sandisfield, Westhampton, Williamsburg, Worthington

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BLANDFORD

Over 570 acres to be purchased for wildlife protection, recreation

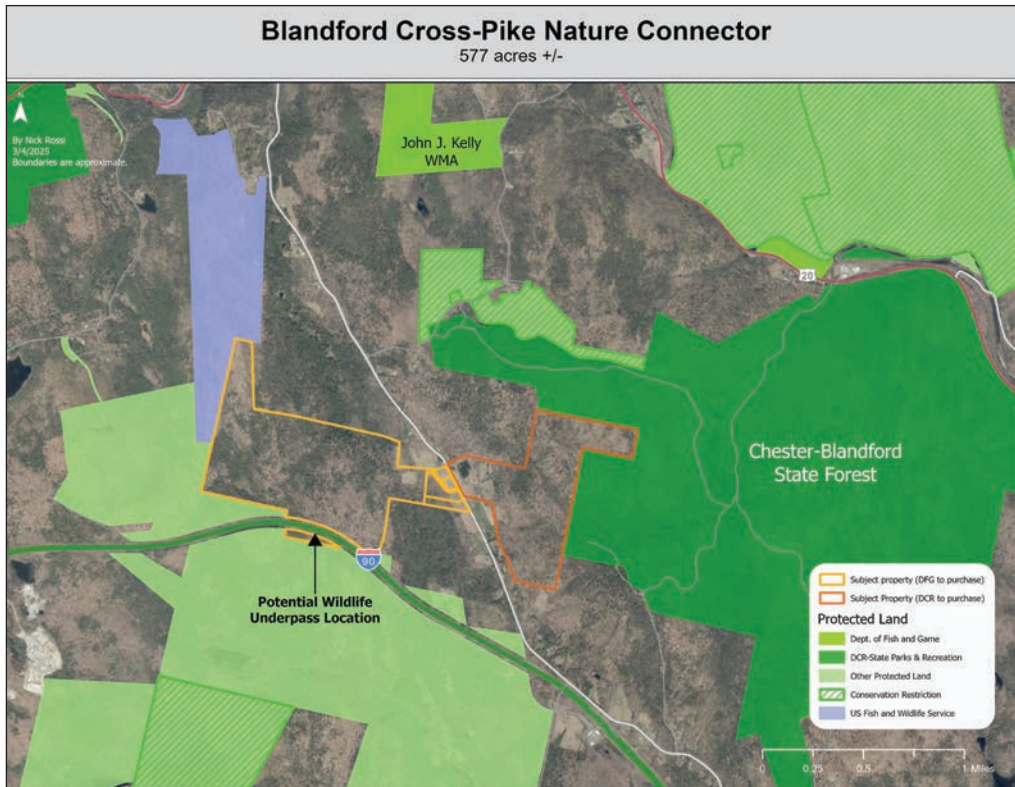
By Mary Kronholm
Correspondent

Conservation Commission Chair Dick Gates spoke with the Select Board Monday, March 17 about land on Chester Road to be used as a "Cross-Pike Nature Connector."

The property in question would create a space for passive recreation as well as a wildlife protection area. He told the board he had been contacted by the Department of Recreation and Conservation by email about this earlier.

The land, a little more than 572 acres is owned by the Terry family and the property that abuts the Chester-Blandford State Forest is comprised of 218 acres on the east side of the road. This area has been used as a Christmas Tree farm. Currently the State Forest is available for hiking/walking, fishing and biking.

The Nature Conservancy, a private non-government organization, is in the process of buying the land and will then sell it to two state agencies. The eastern half of the land is to be owned by



This map shows the Blandford cross-pike nature connector. The orange outline shows proposed property acquisition. Map courtesy of Nick Rossi, DCR

Department of Conservation and Recreation and the western portion is to be owed by the Department of Fish and Game. TNC is buying it first to accommodate the current owner's timeline as the state agencies are unable to move

fast enough.

According to Nick Rossi, DCR Land Protection Specialist, Mass Department of Transportation in collaboration with the partners, hopes to install a wildlife underpass under the Mass

Pike as they have identified this as a good location. These underpasses are great for wildlife, but an underappreciated by-product is reduced traffic collisions.

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HUNTINGTON

School Committee passes budget on second try

By Wendy Long
Correspondent

A special school committee meeting was held remotely on Monday, March 17 in a second attempt to achieve a 67% quorum and vote to approve the Fiscal 2026 Budget for the Gateway Regional School District.

As this was for a single purpose, was not on the committee's usual meeting night and marked the third meeting in as many weeks, the meeting was conducted remotely over zoom. Attending were school committee members Tara Balboni, Jeana Briggs, Nicole Daviau, Pegg Dragon, Brian Fogue, Jason Fogue, Alicia Hansen, Keri Morawiec, Lyndsey Papillon, Alex Seid and Tasha Strong. Three members were absent and the fifteenth seat for Huntington is currently vacant, which also counts as a "no" vote. Ten affirmative votes were required to pass the budget and all present voted in favor of the budget.

The budget vote was broken into three motions: one for the Chester Elementary cost center totaling \$1,494,787; one for Gateway Regional School totaling \$5,132,480; and the total FY' 26 budget for the entire district of \$18,254,669. The Chester and Gateway Regional School budgets were voted separately so that school committee members Lyndsey Papillon and Tara Balboni, who have family members employed in those schools-could recuse themselves from those votes. Both were then able to take part in voting the total district budget.

The School Committee hosted their annual Budget Hearing on Wednesday, March 5, whereupon Superintendent Kristen Smidy gave a presentation on the FY '26 budget. Officials said that next year's budget is based upon a number of assumptions including continuing to receive level funded or close to current levels Rural

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MONTGOMERY

Music in Montgomery announces April lineup

By Wendy Long
Correspondent

The April Music in Montgomery lineup has been announced and includes favorites Ed Bentley & Friends; The Ravenwood String Band; Craig Manning, Dave LaBlanc and Larry Southard and closes with Helen Arbour and Joe Nerney.

All of these musicians perform throughout Western Massachusetts and may be joined during this series by surprise guests. Concerts are held every Thursday at Montgomery Town Hall, 161 Main Road and begin at 3 p.m.

The month opens on April 3 with Ed Bentley & Friends, who share the tagline "men of a certain age." Featuring country, rock and folk music, the band includes Jane Martin Pelletier on vocals and guitar and Ron Campagna on bass and vocals. This trio can also be seen at the Daily Grind in Southwick, at open mics at Bright Ideas Brewing and Shortstop Bar & Grill in Westfield and the Southwick Inn. Campagna also performs on Wednesday

evenings at the American Legion Post 351 in Holyoke.

The Ravenwood String Band takes the stage on Thursday, April 10. Led by guitarist Barry Searle, the band includes Don Calsyn on fiddle and John Alphin on Mandolin and is frequently joined by a bass player and vocalist. Ravenwood does covers of bluegrass-influenced string jazz.

On Thursday, April 17, Larry Southard returns and will be joined by Craig Manning and Dave LeBlanc, both on guitar. Music in Montgomery organizer Dale Rogers says the group always brings "a heart-warming, singing along, tapping, clapping good time." Southard also performs locally in Papa and Friends, a rock-country-folk band who includes Lesley Friedman Rosenthal (violin, harmony), Terry AlaBery (Terrance Hall on drums), Mike Patoniac (bass and harmonica) and Andy Gordon (pedal steel and banjo).

Helen Arbour & Joe Nerney close the month on Thursday, April 24. Arbour has performed with bands

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BLANDFORD

Trivia Night 'FUNdraiser' benefits the GEF

By Wendy Long
Correspondent

The emphasis was on the fun at the fourth Annual Trivia Night fundraiser to benefit the Gateway Education Foundation on Saturday, March 22 at Blandford Town Hall.

Parents, staff, students and community members formed teams to take part in a challenge to test useless knowledge. Admission was \$25 per person, or \$175 for a table of 8. The evening included the trivia contest, a door prize raffle and 50/50 raffle. Together, these three pieces raised over \$3,500 for the Foundation.

The Gateway Education Foundation began in 2012 to enhance the educational opportunities of students in the Gateway Regional School District. To date, GEF funded 125 projects totaling \$119,000. It funds "out-of-the-box" learning opportunities, such as interviews with Holocaust survivors, author visits or a field trip to study the physics of roller coasters.

Michele Crane, former broadcaster, former School Committee Chair, wife of an alumnus and the mother of two alumni, served as the emcee of the event. Her first task was to invite GEF

Board President Avery Wing to the microphone. Wing said that the Foundation pays for experiences and items that the school budget cannot cover. Just this week, students in Gateway's welding and early childhood programs took part in the vocational Skills USA competition.

This event requires that students wear a Skills USA jacket and Gateway students used to have to arrange to borrow jackets from other schools. Thanks to GEF, Gateway Regional School was able to purchase a set of

jackets for their students.

Crane announced the rules for the night and began the questions. Each half of the night consisted of five rounds of five questions each. Topics included sports, geography, pop culture, music, science and even a set of questions around the school district and surrounding region. Teams had to grapple with questions like, "Who holds the all time NCAA Division I scoring record in college basketball?" (Caitlin Clark) or "What mountain inspired Dr. Seuss's Mr. Crumpet

in How the Grinch Stole Christmas?" (Mount Tom).

Teams recorded their answers for each round, which were picked up by student "runners" senior Ben Pritchard and junior Theodore DeAngelis-Page. A panel of judges-junior Eliza Mueller, alumnus Joey Pisani, senior Cynthia Papillon and senior Madilyn Beneway-scored the sheets and board members Lyndsey Papillon and Nick Balboni posted the scores.

By intermission,

TRIVIA, page 7



And the winner is! The Hilltown Hippies took the high score of the night. They are Sean St. Clair, Abby Meunier, Martha Otterbeck, Matt Meunier, Jenna Kakimoto, Linda Hyjek, Ben Hyjek and Annie Pritchard. Turley photo by Wendy Long



Becket.....2
Blandford.....7
Business Directory.....3
Chester.....6
Chesterfield.....11

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Easthampton.....8
Goshen.....2
Huntington.....3

Montgomery.....8
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Worthington.....6



HILLTOWN HIKING ADVENTURES



Tom and Frankie, the Frenchie, eat lunch by the river's edge near the 70 foot high arch.

Hikers make another trek to Keystone Arch Bridge

By Elizabeth Massa
Guest Columnist

Note: Historic facts are courtesy of Dave Pierce.

It has been written about in this very newspaper many times in the past about our Hilltown Destination known to many simply as the KAB.

The Keystone Arch Bridges Trail not only takes one to the first series of stone arch railroad bridges built in America, but tracks the first Wild & Scenic River and the longest free-flowing river in MA, all within the states largest roadless wilderness. This unmatched historic and environmental experience is 90% within the town of Middlefield and Hampshire County, with portions in Chester; Hampered County and Becket; Berkshire County.

The keystone arches in Becket, Chester and Middlefield have exceeded expectations, carrying trains 40 times heavier than designed, with no maintenance for 91 years after being bypassed in 1912. Early locomotives paved the

way for increasingly powerful engines to handle heavier trains and steeper climbs.

Engineering of stone arches was, by the 1830s, a well-established procedure. First developed by the Romans, it is one of only three advances in the science of spanning large spaces in the history of civilization. First were columns, developed by the Greeks, then arches, which could morph into domes, and lastly, in early 20th century America, structural steel.

The oldest known arch still in use is believed to be in China, erected in 610 AD. While this would seem to make arch building technology somewhat mundane by 1835, it was still a painstaking and very expensive method of bridge construction. Therefore, they were chosen for only the most remote locations in the belief that the elimination of periodic maintenance would justify the added expense.

The trail is accessed from Herbert Cross Road, off Middlefield Road in Chester. Park by the kiosk and begin walking. Hikers

will see the double arch at the end of Babcock Brook with its turquoise blue Serpentine Rocks. The true highlight, if there is such a thing, (since this entire trail is a highlight) is my personal favorite. The National Historic Landmark known as the seventy foot stone arch is the big beauty in the woods.

People have to hike in for about two miles or so to get to it and the trail takes you walking right over it. The woods begin to open to the sky as hikers come onto the 70 foot high arch. This bridge sports massive wing walls, some gently curving through the forest for up to 300 feet.

This stone arch bridge abandoned by the railroad long ago is seventy feet tall and has wing walls in both directions. No guard rails protect you from the edges so be cautious with your dogs and your footing while you cross this magnificent wonder.

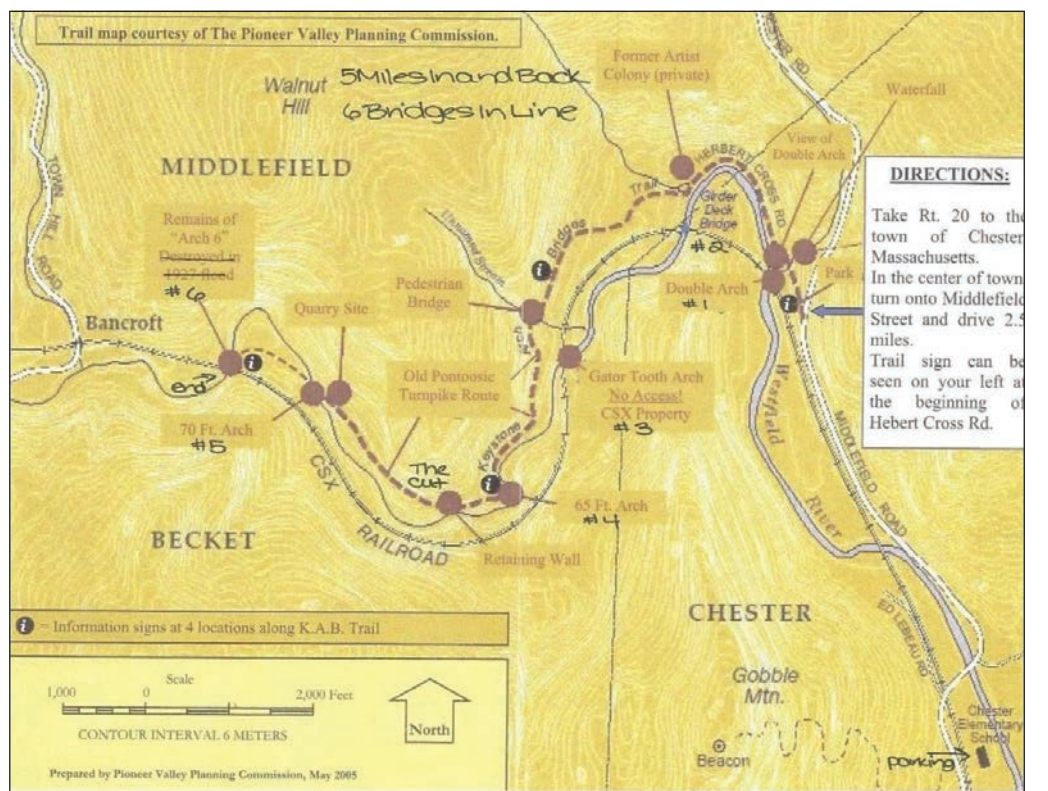
Look at both sides of this arch as they are both very different. You can see the buttresses and how they



A Hilltown hiker points to the massive wing walls by the bridge providing prospective to the size of the arch bridge.



Before the leaves peep out, hikers get the grand view of the entire stone arch.



This is a map of the Keystone Arch Bridge Trail.

Submitted photos

were built to withstand the rivers power. Over the years, the river has unfortunately take is a bit crumbled.

The ultimate experience is to get down below on the

steep footpath. People will be amazed at what they see and it will be well worth it. Observation of this bridge from water level is a must and it is truly the crescendo

of the hike. This is a breathtaking structure, brilliantly revealing its ancestry in the great cathedrals of the Old World. Whistlers Cathedrals never disappoint.

WILLIAMSBURG

Land Trusts launch campaign to purchase golf course

WILLIAMSBURG – The Trustees of Reservations and Hilltown Land Trust are working to purchase the Beaver Brook Golf Course in Williamsburg and Northampton with the intention of rewilding the property to create a dynamic hub for recreation and conservation.

A fundraising campaign has been launched to raise \$1.5 million by June 30 to complete the purchase of 288 acres of floodplain, wetlands and forest. The Beaver Brook acquisition would fulfill many of The Trustees' objectives in its new five-year strategic plan, which will accelerate conservation of large landscapes, build climate resilience, and connect more people to nature.

The property is highly visible along Route 9, the busiest east-west road in Hampshire County. As a new Trustees' reservation, the floodplain will be rewilded, creating a community park with accessible walking trails and scenic views. The surrounding wooded hills have informal trails that The Trustees will improve, providing

enhanced connectivity and access. The property and trails will support snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, and mountain biking, among other activities. The existing cart paths will provide accessible trails to accommodate wheelchairs, strollers and walkers.

Existing buildings on the property will be repurposed in the future to provide flexible space for community gatherings, a potential western Massachusetts headquarters and office space for The Trustees and its affiliate Hilltown Land Trust and workshop space for The Trustees' and HLT's stewardship staff and equipment.

"Protecting and restoring Beaver Brook, one of the largest remaining tracts of open land in the Northampton area, will provide new opportunities for people to get outside while enhancing critical wildlife habitat, and building climate resiliency," said Katie Theoharides, president and CEO of The Trustees. "As an organization, The Trustees is committed to

continued support for critical conservation work in Western Massachusetts and look forward to stewarding this important community resource."

The acquisition will include restoration of the Beaver Brook floodplain, focusing on replanting native species and restoring the floodplain habitat, which will allow the brook to naturally meander and store floodwaters. Recognized by the Commonwealth as a cold-water fishery and core aquatic habitat, restoration will also enhance the property's biodiversity and climate resilience. The remainder of the property's roughly 175 acres of forest will provide significant carbon storage and vital habitat for plants and wildlife. The restoration process will be documented for scientific study to help inform future approaches to restoration and interpretive signage will engage visitors in the hopeful work of nature-based climate solutions.

The Trustees has until June 30 to raise the \$1.5

million needed to purchase Beaver Brook, said Wendy Ferris, The Trustees' vice president for the Central and Valley Region.

"Beaver Brook is a great opportunity for residents of the Valley to come together to save the largest remaining undeveloped property so close to a city in Hampshire County," Ferris said. "It's a rare location that is part of a connected wildlife corridor, on a busy road and bus route, and part of a neighborhood. The property will feature accessible walking paths, diverse trails through the woodlands, restored ecosystems, and amazing potential for environmental and ecological education. It is our plan that it becomes a destination for education and recreation pursuits."

Ferris said the property is also attractive because the existing 250-person pavilion will provide a beautiful and flexible sheltered gathering space with sweeping views. The communities of Northampton and Williamsburg play important roles by applying

for state grants which, if successful, will result in Williamsburg holding a conservation restriction on most of the property owned by The Trustees with Northampton acquiring a smaller portion of the property that lies within its city limits.

"Hilltown Land Trust is thrilled to be involved in this transformative project which is one of the best opportunities to improve the region's climate resilience and offer new recreational opportunities," said HLT Executive Director Sally Loomis. "A project of this size requires the capacity of a statewide land trust such as The Trustees and the community connections of a regional organization such as HLT. This project highlights the original purpose of the formal affiliation between these two organizations."

The total cost of acquiring, activating, and endowing the project is \$5.5 million and The Trustees have public and private grants in the pipeline totaling \$4 million. The Trustees is seeking donations for the remaining \$1.5

million by the end of June 2025.

It will take approximately two years for the new reservation to be fully activated, which includes rewilding the golf course area, installing signage, completing trail work and converting the existing clubhouse into office space. For more information on the project or to make an online gift toward the purchase of Beaver Brook, people may visit www.thetrustees.org/beaverbrook.

Founded by landscape architect Charles Eliot in 1891, The Trustees has, for over 130 years, been a catalyst for important ideas, endeavors and progress in Massachusetts. The Trustees is the nation's first preservation and conservation organization and its landscapes and landmarks continue to inspire discussion, innovation and action today as they did in the past. We are a nonprofit, supported by members, friends and donors and our 123 sites are destinations for residents, members and visitors alike, welcoming millions of guests annually.