



■ TIGHT END SETS RECORD AS PATS SQUEEZE PAST REDSKINS
■ ALSO, CHRISTIE CALIENDO A GOAL MACHINE FOR BILLERICA

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Marshall: 'I am a risk-taker'

North Middlesex school chief's latest challenge: Retirement

By Katina Caraganis
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She has been a classroom teacher, associate principal, principal and, for the majority of her career, a school superintendent in two districts.

Soon, Maureen Marshall will be a retiree.

Marshall, who has been the superintendent for the North Middlesex Regional School District since James McCormick retired in 2006, and an educator for more than 30 years, announced last week she is retiring.

Marshall said she has some other professional opportunities



Maureen Marshall, superintendent of the North Middlesex Regional School District, reflects on the time she has worked in the district a recent morning in her office in Pepperell. She has announced she will retire in August.

SENTINEL & ENTERPRISE/BRETT CRAWFORD

she's looking to pursue but would not elaborate.

Marshall said applying for the job at North Middlesex originally wasn't her intent, but when her

daughter went off to college, she began looking at her options after being the superintendent for the Quabbin Regional School District in Barre for more than 20 years.

"My life was changing, and I was thinking about what other opportunities were out there,"

Please see **MARSHALL/5**

Health deal in works?

Lowell, unions may be close on changes to insurance plans

By Lyle Moran
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LOWELL — Because the city is close to reaching a deal with its municipal unions over health-care changes, City Manager Bernie Lynch plans to ask the City Council tomorrow night to delay voting on accepting a new state law giving him "plan design" powers.

The municipal health-care law passed by the state Legislature earlier this year was designed to help municipal managers save their communities millions of dollars by allowing them to make health-care changes with limited union input.

Lynch said Friday he hopes the delay will give the members of the city's 17 unions an extra week to approve what he termed a "tentative deal." If the unions, including the

Please see **HEALTH/10**

LOCAL NEWS

School wins battle vs. car

Two teens were hurt and a car demolished when it hit the Moody School, but the school is just fine. **Page 3**

ON THE WEB

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TODAY'S QUESTION

Which is most important to you?

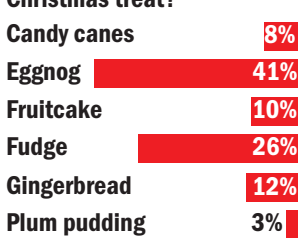
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YESTERDAY'S QUESTION RESULTS

What's your favorite Christmas treat?



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TOMORROW'S WEATHER

Partly sunny; high of 45°
DETAILS ON PAGE 5

A MediaNews Group PUBLICATION



Rebecca Mattson, project manager for the live/work units on Western Avenue, shows off the newly renovated space at the Western Avenue studios.
SUN/TORY GERMANN

Blank canvas awaits at artists' Western Avenue live/work space

By Jennifer Myers
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LOWELL — Nothing excites an artist more than a blank canvas. Imagine 77,000 square feet of blank canvas.

Construction has begun on the long-awaited artist live/work units in the "G" Mill

of the Western Avenue Studios complex along the Pawtucket Canal.

The first floor of the 75-year-old mill, which previously housed Joan Fabrics, has been gutted. Sandblasting begins this week. On the second floor, where the

Please see **WESTERN/10**

Most should expect rise in property taxes

By Erin Smith
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Groton and Dunstable homeowners may get a surprise when they open their property-tax bills next month: Bills for the average single-family homes are expected to drop by \$119 and \$170, respectively.

Tewksbury residents are in for a different surprise: The average property-tax bill is skyrocketing. Single-family homeowners will pay \$552 more next year on average.

As municipal officials across the region send out tax bills for the new year, homeowners should be prepared to fork over more money in taxes in 2012. The average tax bill is only

Please see **TAXES/10**

13 DAYS TO CHRISTMAS



Vincent Lopez, age 9, Billerica
Ditson Elementary School

Single dad is desperate this Christmas

By Sun Santa's Elves

Ron's wife, Debbie, passed away in February 2007, leaving him their six children to raise on his own.

Ron is in great need of help, he admits.

Despite working 40 hours a week, the modest salary he earns barely covers the family's rent, and the necessities of food, clothing, electricity, gas and medical expenses for the children, including the youngest, who is 4.

Any help that Sun Santa might provide to aid in providing for his family during the holiday season would be greatly appreciated, Ron said.



With the economy still in a tailspin and the rise in unemployment and foreclosures, there is a greater need than ever this holiday season. Last year, The Sun Santa Fund, part of Lowell Sun Charities, assisted nearly 1,500 families in need by providing them with vouchers for toys and food. Through the help of generous donors, Sun Santa was able to distribute about \$220,000 in vouchers during last year's holiday season.

As in past years, Sun Santa is teaming up

Please see **SUN SANTA/5**

It's easy to donate to Sun Santa!
Send your tax deductible donation by mail to Sun Santa, P.O. Box 1477, Lowell, MA 01853 or contribute online at www.lowellsun.com/sunsanta

How Much Will You Pay This Year?

Municipality	Average single-family home	Annual bill	Change for average single-family homeowner
Ayer	\$271,600	\$3,558	+ \$265
Chelmsford	\$323,200	\$5,652	+ \$220
Dracut	\$276,000	\$3,568	+ \$119
Dunstable	\$390,000	\$5,800	- \$170
Groton	\$396,300	\$6,372	- \$119
Littleton	\$370,625	\$5,960	+ \$303
Lowell	\$218,791	\$3,231	+ \$30
Tewksbury	\$315,614	\$4,712	+ \$552
Tyngsboro	\$316,400	\$4,837	+ \$332
Westford	\$443,811	\$6,902	+ \$183
Wilmington	\$357,745	\$4,343	+ \$101

Note: The state's Department of Revenue must still officially approve the new tax rates for Ayer, Littleton, Lowell and Tewksbury as of Friday. Officials in those communities supplied data for the projected rates. Billerica has yet to set a tax rate.

Source: Municipalities

Most local residents should expect rise in property taxes

TAXES/From Page 1

expected to drop in the two aforementioned local communities.

Local-aid cuts have translated into higher property taxes for some communities, where municipal leaders may have considered raising taxes lower than the allowed limit in the past, according to Barbara Anderson, a director at Citizens for Limited Taxation.

"Now, with the state cutting back, the local taxpayers are paying for everything," Anderson said.

The tax bill for the average Groton homeowner decreased due to a combination of homes affected by the economic downturn and homes on waterfront properties and in high-end subdivisions that sold above assessed values, according to Groton officials.

Meanwhile, folks in neighboring Dunstable can thank a drop in home values, as well as a reduction in town debt and the school district's operating budget for their tax cut.

Littleton finished paying some of its debts this year, but it wasn't enough to offset debt exclusions that passed for the police station and new schools or to make a dent in tax bills, according to Littleton officials. Property taxes are expected to increase about \$303 for the average homeowner.

Meanwhile, the bill for the average single-family home in Lowell is expected to increase by about \$30, the lowest increase among area communities raising tax rates. Taxes were expected to increase \$60 on average until the City Council voted to put \$1 million in additional state aid toward property-tax relief.

That could spell trouble for homeowners next year.

Tyngsboro is now bracing for a 2012 tax spike after tax bills were kept artificially low this year after Town Meeting voted in May 2010 to use the state's final reimbursement check for the Tyngsboro High School construction project to fund part of the town's annual operating budget. The average Tyngsboro homeowner will pay \$332 more next year.

Ayer homeowners are also expected to see higher bills after selectmen approved a tax-rate shift to lessen the burden for businesses. Commercial-property owners are expected to carry 53.5 percent of the tax burden next year, a slight decrease from the 55 percent burden this year.

"It's a bad idea to begin with to have a split rate," CLT's Anderson said. "In a recession, you often see a shift away from the business community onto residential. There's a sudden shock to homeowners who weren't expecting it."

The 11.7 percent tax hike for Tewksbury homeowners is attributed to a 2.5 percent tax-levy increase, the sewer-debt shift and a new high school. Tewksbury also has a split tax rate, with commercial-property owners carrying about 28 percent or the tax burden, while residential property owners shoulder the rest.

State law limits municipalities to a 2.5 percent annual increase to the tax levy, and Westford and Chelmsford officials said the tax-rate increases in those communities were due to the maximum levy increase allowed under the law.



U.S. Sen. Scott Brown checks in with Santa Claus at *The Sun* office in Lowell during the WCAP Salvation Army Radiothon.

SUN/TORY GERMANN

Brown: Congress needs to stop 'playing games' with payroll-tax cut

By Jennifer Myers
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LOWELL — U.S. Sen. Scott Brown feels Congress can reach a deal this week on extending the Social Security payroll-tax cut if the Democrats stop "playing games" and engaging in "political theater," he told *The Sun* on Saturday morning.

On Friday, House Republicans released a bill to extend the payroll-tax cuts, set to expire Jan. 1, as well as extending but trimming long-term unemployment benefits and preventing a cut to Medicare reimbursements.

If not approved, the payroll tax will revert to 6.2 percent from the current 4.2 percent. The cut saved a family earning \$50,000 annually \$1,000 this year.

The provisions of the bill, if approved, come at a price tag of \$180 million. Therein lies one of the sticking points between Democrats and Republicans in Washington.

The Democrats' plan calls for increasing taxes on the richest Americans to raise revenue and pick up the tab for the bill — a move Brown opposes.

"We didn't pay for it before — it will ultimately pay for itself," Brown said of the bill, saying the cuts will spur economic activity by keeping more money in people's pockets. "A proposal raising taxes to provide cuts is not appropriate."

President Barack Obama pinned the game-playing on Republicans in his weekly radio address.

"Republicans in Congress should stop the games and extend the payroll-tax cut for working Americans," Obama said. "Congress can't end the year by taking money out of the pockets of working Americans."

Republicans have called for spending cuts, including holding the federal wage freeze in place, reducing the number of employees in the federal government and increasing the Medicare contribution of wealthy seniors.

Democrats have expressed concern that the Republican bill does not go far enough. Obama is pushing to cut the payroll tax to 3.1 percent, as well as providing similar tax cuts to employers.

Democrats also think the Republican-proposed extension of long-term unemployment benefits is too miserly. The bill would eventually reduce the maximum unemployment benefit from 99 weeks to 59 weeks.

The Republicans added a provision to the bill compelling Obama to issue a permit for work to allow the controversial proposal Keystone XL pipeline to be built from Canada to Texas. The multibillion-dollar project is expected to create a heated debate between the two parties.

Obama said he will not sign the bill if it includes the pipeline provision.

"When we work together, things pass at 100 percent," Brown said, using as an example the Hire a Hero Act, which he co-sponsored. "When they want to stop playing games, we can be effective."

Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.

But Wilmington only raised its levy by about 2 percent, according to Town Assessor Skip Moynihan. That's why the average Wilmington homeowner will see his taxes increase by about \$100, significantly less than other area communities, Moynihan said.

Wilmington property owners could see a more significant tax increase in future years because, like Dracut,

Wilmington residents won't see the charge to fund the new high school on this year's bill.

Moynihan said new homes, more personal property — machinery, equipment and inventory for businesses — and relatively flat assessment rates have helped limit tax increases.

"The values in Wilmington have stabilized. That's an encouraging sign," he said.

Council asked to hold off on plan-design vote

HEALTH/From Page 1

school unions, come to an agreement with the city before Dec. 20, Lynch said he will not seek plan-design authority.

The city manager declined to go into specifics on the three-year deal being discussed, but said the potential deal would generate savings for the city in line with his earlier estimates of between \$5 million to \$9 million in the first year. He said it would also save union jobs.

"I'm pleased with what we are looking at as a possible agreement," Lynch said. "There are big savings there for the city that carry over to the employees."

The proposal being considered would have city employees shifting into the state's Group Insurance Commission, several officials involved in the talks confirmed. The GIC offers health-care plans to state employees and municipal employees whose communities have joined the GIC.

GIC plans would feature lower premiums than the Blue Cross Blue Shield plans the city offers, but higher co-pays and deductibles for most employees. The employees who would realize the greatest benefit are those who access health-care benefits the least.

What the unions will receive in exchange for agreeing to join the GIC is unclear. But the city's non-school unions could be in line for pay raises in their new contracts because of the savings produced by a health-care agreement, officials familiar with the negotiations said. The city is in the midst of negotiating new contracts with its unions.

Police Sgt. Thomas Fleming, the chairman of the Public Employee Committee representing the city's 17 unions in talks with Lynch, agreed that the two sides are close to a deal, but said he would term Lynch's offer as a "proposal," not a tentative deal.

He said union leaders will bring Lynch's proposal to their memberships this week and will seek votes to support the offer later in the week and into Monday of the following week.

"I'm going to recommend to my membership that they approve it," said Fleming, president of the Lowell Police Superior Officers Association. "I think it is a good proposal."

Fleming said he is grateful for the City Council's September vote to delay for three months acting on Lynch's request for plan-design powers and directing Lynch to try to work out a deal with the unions.

The unions have met more than 20 times either among themselves or with city officials since September, Fleming said.

"Because of the way the city manager negotiated with us, we could have more say than in plan design," he said.

Whether or not a deal is completed will rest with the city's school unions, which represent about two-thirds of the city's unionized employees. An agreement would require a weighted vote, which is why the school unions hold such power.

United Teachers of Lowell President Paul Georges declined to comment on the specifics of the negotiations taking place because he said Fleming is the spokesman for the unions. Georges would only say Friday that the United of Teachers of Lowell has been participating in the negotiations.

The sticking point for the teachers, according to those familiar with the talks, could be what provisions are made in any deal to protect retirees.

The school unions did not take part in a deal the city reached with 14 city unions earlier this year to eliminate the Master Medical health-plan in exchange for two \$500 payments for employees. The school unions said the agreement, which saved the city \$1 mil-

lion, did not take retirees into consideration, so they opted out.

Lynch said that if a health-care deal is reached, the savings could go toward a mitigation fund for city employees impacted by the health-care changes; property-tax relief; maintaining city services; and help with upcoming collective-bargaining negotiations with city unions.

The city would need to reach the agreement under Section 19 of Massachusetts General Law Chapter 32B, which is a coalition-bargaining statute. Coalition bargaining gives each union a weighted vote based on membership, and leaves a seat at the table for retirees.

The City Council voted last Tuesday to set a Dec. 20 public hearing to accept the coalition-bargaining section of state law.

But Lynch said if there is no agreement with the unions by Dec. 20, he will ask for the council to accept the plan-design statutes of Chapter 32B, Sections 21-23, on that date.

Mayor James Milinazzo said he is glad to hear that Lynch has made progress on a deal with the unions. The mayor said he would be inclined to delay the plan-design vote for a week, but could not comment for the rest of the council.

"I'm going to recommend to my membership that they approve it."

Thomas Fleming, president of the Lowell Police Superior Officers Association

Blank canvases await artists at Western Avenue live/work space

WESTERN/From Page 1

sandblasting is done, a stunning 25-foot-high wood ceiling is visible, leaving ample storage space for the complex.

Fifty rental units, ranging from 782 square feet to 1,662 square feet, with 14-foot-high ceilings and windows 22 feet wide and 7 feet high, bathing the units in natural light, are scheduled to be ready for occupancy in May.

The artists will move in to blank walls, doors and hallways thirsty for their creative touch.

"We don't have to give them anything fancy because we know they want to paint and decorate the spaces themselves," said project manager Rebecca Mattson of Sagebrook Development. "We are just priming the walls — the rest is up to them. There are infinite possibilities."

Rents are slated for about \$1 per square foot, Mattson added. Half of the units are already spoken for, many by members of the 200-artist community who rent studio space at Western Avenue.

"As part of our financing, we promised the lender (TD Bank) we would have 50 percent pre-leased because no one had ever done this before in Lowell," she said.

Being a pioneer has its challenges.

The city's Zoning Board of Appeals initially denied the

project in January 2008, as business owners in the industrial neighborhood argued that having people living there would pose safety issues.

A revised version of the original project was unanimously approved at an August 2008 ZBA meeting that was packed with exuberant artists. Members who had previously expressed public-safety and business concerns said their concerns were satisfied.

The excitement was short-lived, though, as financing for the project had gone sideways. Complex owner/visionary Karl Frey found himself at square one and banging his head against the wall, looking at a vast, vacant building that was costing him \$90,000 a year in taxes and maintenance costs.

He tried to sell the building for its assessed value. He tried to rent the space out at \$3 per square foot.

Last spring, Frey told *The Sun* the project began to show signs of life when he connected with Mattson, who had been involved in building the new Boston Garden and other multimillion-dollar projects in Boston.

This past summer, when Mattson and Frey were securing financing for the \$6 million project, they were certain part of that package would be made up of tax-exempt bonds from MassDevelopment. However, they hit an impasse when MassDevel-

opment insisted they also take low-income tax credits.

Mattson said the guideline attached to those credits are very strict and would have required Frey to rent out a 1,600-square-foot unit for \$800 a month rather than \$1,600, a plan that was not feasible for the project.

"They just could not get their minds around what we wanted to do," Mattson said.

So the project was financed through traditional financing, buoyed by the historically low interest rates.

"We hit a perfect storm," she said. "The collapse of the condo market lifted the rental market and significantly lowered the interest rates, which has really benefited this project."

What's next at Western Avenue? Next year, 35 to 40 new studios will be constructed in the section of the "A" Mill that had, until last month, housed Elite Yarns, which moved to Billerica.

Additional plans call for redeveloping the entrances to the studios to make them more visitor-friendly, refurbishing the boiler and machine-shop rooms into meeting areas and, in late 2012, converting the first floor of the C/D Mill into artist studios.

Most of the power for the site comes from a 198-kilowatt solar-panel system installed earlier this year.

For more information visit www.westernavenuelofts.com.

'Chanukah Lights' discussion tomorrow in Chelmsford

CHELMSFORD — Rabbi Edward Friedman of Congregation Beth Israel of the Merrimack Valley will conduct a discussion of "Chanukah Lights in the Teachings of Rav Kook," based on the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, the chief rabbi of Palestine during the British Mandate, tomorrow

at 12:30 p.m., at the main Chelmsford Public Library. All are welcome to join in the discussion regardless of religious affiliation. Bring a bag dairy or vegetarian lunch; cold drinks and dessert are provided. For contact info, contact Emily Marget at 978-996-6456 or Emily.Marget@msn.com or the temple at 978-474-0540.