

Sakonnet Times

eastbayri.com

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2024

VOL. 58, NO. 53 \$2.00

2024 — What a year



Lt. Michael Amaral gives oxygen to Ebb the cat, which made it.

Looking back at 2024 in Sakonnet

BY TED HAYES

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Political issues. Public land use rights. Housing, money and the environment. All took center stage in 2024 — Here's a quick look back at some of the stories that captured the Sakonnet area's attention this year.

The housing squeeze

The problem has been years in the making and is only getting worse. But Little Compton saw more progress on the affordable housing front than it has in memory.

As prices continue to rise and long-time residents worry whether they'll be able to afford a future here, various organizations made significant leaps forward over the past 12 months:

The housing trust purchased five acres of land off Old Harbor Road and will soon come

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School girls show what they want during a public meeting on the future of the Fort Barton School, and Tiverton School District finances, held earlier this year.

The Lafayette House destruction — Who, why, when?

Permit amended, then amended back last week, nearly three months after approval

BY TED HAYES

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Tiverton Police Chief Patrick Jones, who has been serving as interim town administrator since the first week of December, predicted a reporter's questions before he even asked them Christmas Eve morning:

"This must be about the house," he said.

Jones, who has served in the interim role since the departure of former administrator Chris Cotta, has walked into what he acknowledged is a "firestorm" following the destruction of the historic Lafayette House at 3118 Main Road last Wednesday, Dec. 18. The historic and instantly recognizable home's loss has galvanized the town, and Jones said he has heard from many residents upset about it.

Last Tuesday, Jones said that while he does not have all the facts of the case and isn't familiar with all the steps that went into the home's demolition and the town's approval of it, he will find out:

"I'm definitely going to look into this and see what role the town had, and if anything needs to be changed to better avoid these situations in the future. Are there procedures that can be put in place to either avoid these or address them?"

The permit

Kingston resident David Rose, who owns the 35.6 acres on which the home formerly sat and another 46 acres of land elsewhere in Tiverton, applied for a demolition permit in August, writing 'No' when prompted to state whether the 1760 home was "listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Register, or the local, Tiverton Register of Historic Places?"

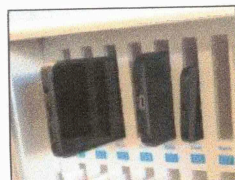
Though not listed on the national register, the house is on a list of historic Tiverton homes available on the town's website, and

See LAFAYETTE Page 5



Students park their phones
School districts are beginning to make their days phone-free

EAST BAY LIFE



LAFAYETTE: Home was offered up for salvage prior to demolition

From Page 1

with the Rhode Island Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission.

One question Jones wants to answer is how the home's historic nature was missed as the demo permit was reviewed, and what, if any, penalties, exist when an application contains false information.

Hoyle on leave

That role would have fallen to building inspector and code enforcement officer John Hoyle, who has served here since 2021 and was on the job when the demo application was first received and when he signed it in late October.

But Hoyle was unavailable to comment on the issue this week — he has been on leave since the first week of December, the same week Jones took over as interim town administrator. When asked about the nature of the leave, Jones said he could not comment further, citing personnel confidentiality restraints.

But he said that in Hoyle's place, the town has hired a part time zoning official and is working with the state's office of code enforcement to help keep up with the department's heavy workload. He would comment on when or if Hoyle will return.

While the office remains without a full time leader, it generated some additional controversy last week when a worker in the office 'amended' the demolition permit application Rose filed last August.

Though Rose marked 'No' on the question regarding its historic status, that answer changed to 'Yes' at some point last week on the town's online permitting portal, which has a record of the permit.

Last Thursday, building department worker Priscilla Resendes said she changed Rose's answer.

Resendes acknowledged that while Rose originally marked 'No,' she overlooked the finer points of the question while reviewing the application months ago, thinking it referred only to the national register, and not any local or state list. She would have made note of it at the time, she said, but "I overlooked it."

So she said she changed it to 'Yes,' she said, confirming that Rose's original answer was 'No.'

"It was a miss on my part so I amended it."

As of Friday, that answer changed back to 'No,' though there was no word from town officials on why it had been changed back.

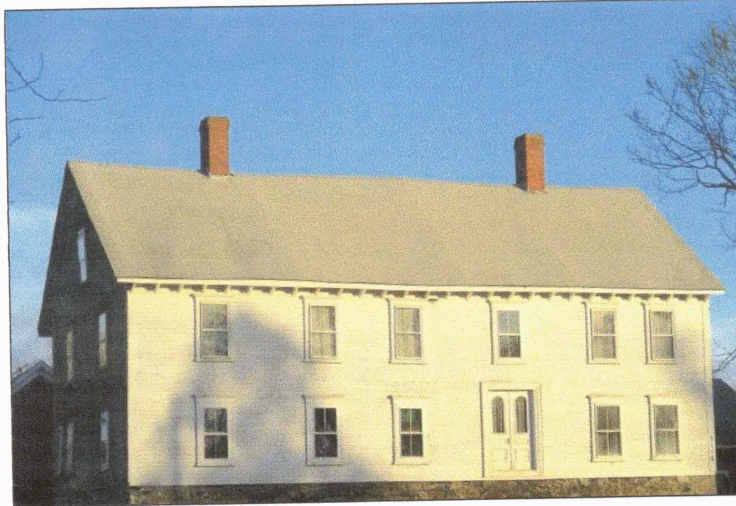
The demo permit is not the first permit to raze or modify the home sought this year, according to Tiverton records.

In June, Rose applied for a building permit, writing in the application that the plan was to "remove structure," though there was no detail as to which building — the Lafayette House, or two barns on the property — would be removed. But that permit was apparently never issued, and the town's online permitting database states only that the application was "stopped" at some point, with no clarification.

As was the case with the demolition permit, Rose marked 'No' when prompted to state whether the structure at issue was historic.

Increased wait period?

One thing Jones wants to get to the bottom of is the town's processes, and how they can be reviewed and improved.



The former Lafayette House at 3118 Main Road in Tiverton.

Jones on Thursday was expected to meet with Susan Anderson, a member of the Tiverton Historic Preservation Advisory Board and the Tiverton Historical Society. In an interview Monday, she bemoaned the home's loss and said the town could have had the tools to address situations like this, had officials only taken the board's advice:

Last year, several years after the destruction of the historic Wingover House in Tiverton, members of the advisory board finalized a proposed ordinance change that would have tightened reporting policies when a historic home was marked for demolition.

Currently, town ordinances require only that permits to demolish historic buildings, structures and sites can only be issued after 90 days have passed following the original application date. The change proposed by the advisory board would have increased that wait period to six months, and would also have required the building inspector to notify the board within 15 days of the original application date.

Anderson said that proposed ordinance change was forwarded to town officials, and she does not know why it was never reviewed or put in place.

Would-be preservationists had a plan

Rose did not return a voicemail left by the Sakonnet Times. But several residents said this week that they have heard that Rose, who has had the property listed for years, originally planned to move part of the structure (for one account, see letter on page 6).

Though it is not well known, the home was added on to in 1810, but the two portions were

not connected, apart from non-structural lathing placed between the two separate structures.

Earlier this year, Tiverton resident B. Hagan saw an ad on Craigslist offering the home for salvage. He was intrigued and wrote in an e-mail to the Sakonnet Times that he contacted a local preservationist who was interested in taking on the job.

Before long, he wrote, a plan was in the works to move the later 1810 addition, though he said it was clear that the earlier portion of the house was "too far gone" after sitting vacant for some 40 years.

Hagan said that local preservationist, who

he declined to name, brought in a crew to strip the plaster and lathe, exposing posts and beams and readying (the newer portion) for removal" off the property, to land elsewhere in Tiverton.

"An architect made drawings and a structural engineer determined that the frame would comply with building codes when re-erected."

Alas, he said, "it didn't happen quickly enough. With brutal speed the building was demolished in a day."

"They're just devastated," Hagan said Tuesday of the would-be preservationists.

Tax incentives as open space

Rose owns at least three properties in Tiverton — the Lafayette land, 15 acres directly across from it on Main Road, and another 31 acres on Seapowet Avenue, according to Tiverton tax records.

The Lafayette house has been in the Rose family for many years, and while it was assessed at a total of \$794,743 for the building and land, the Tiverton Tax Assessor's office confirmed Tuesday morning that much of the 35.6 acres on which the home sat is enrolled in a tax incentive program under the state's Farm, Forest and Open Space Act, which offers land owners significant tax breaks if they use their land for related purposes.

According to the property's most recent revaluation, the home was assessed at \$301,400, and the land at \$493,343. However, the total assessed value is listed at \$463,700, given its enrollment in the state program.

At the town's current \$14.90 tax rate, Rose will save \$4,490.86 per year in taxes with the home no longer being taxed.

Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services

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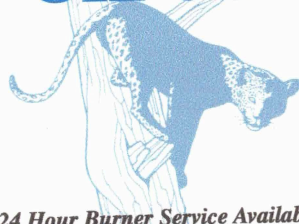
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