

WESTERLY

THE SUN

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Council plan under fire from ACLU

Citizens' comments proposal would stifle free speech, group says



By Dale P. Faulkner
Sun staff writer

WESTERLY — A proposal under consideration by the Town Council to prohibit citizens from discussing town employees' job performance and credentials "undermines free speech rights"

established by the U.S. Constitution, according to the state branch of the American Civil Liberties Union.

In a letter sent to the council Friday, Steven Brown, Rhode Island ACLU executive director, urges the council to reject the proposed amendment to its rules of procedure and notes his organization has succeeded in court challenges of similar policies in other municipalities, including Providence and Tiverton.

In question is a policy that, if adopted, would prohibit "any member of the public [from addressing] matters that pertain to the job performance or credentials of any particular employee by name, position or implication." According to a draft, the policy would protect municipal employees' "rights to privacy" and would "prevent and protect them from vicious and unwarranted public attacks, harassment, defamation and humiliation."

Violations of the policy would be followed by a request for the speaker to leave the council chambers. Instead of speaking in public, citizens would be encouraged to seek out the town manager to communicate concerns about town employees. Town Council President James Silvestri said the proposed change evolved out of an earlier discussion by the council and appears to be based on a memorandum developed by Town At-

See ACLU, A5

The Week Ahead

CAST YOUR BALLOTS

There may be only four names on the ballot but local Democrats have a primary Tuesday for their U.S. Congressional and state General Assembly candidates. Three locations will serve as voting spots for the primary: The Bradford Citizens Club, Westerly Middle School and Springbrook School. For information, stop by Town Hall or call the Board of Canvassers at 401-348-2503, or visit elections.state.ri.us.

THE UNLIKELY THERAPY DOG

Stop by the Savoy Bookshop Wednesday to hear a talk by author Jean Baur, who'll talk about Bella and her book "Joy Unleashed: The Story of Bella, An Unlikely Therapy Dog." The event is free, and Savoy will donate a portion of the book sales to Stand Up for Animals. A raffle is included with prizes donated by Fleming's Feed.

MANIACS IN MISQUAMICUT

Hear one of the original alternative rock bands, 10,000 Maniacs, which put "Candy Everybody Wants" on the charts, this Saturday when the Misquamicut Business Association presents Fallfest 2016. Visit misquamicutfestival.org for details and tickets.

PADDY'S OLYMPICS

Break the ice with your teammates Sunday during the first-ever Paddy's Beach Olympics, a benefit for the Lions Club of Westerly at Paddy's Misquamicut Beach. Cost is \$200 per six-person team. Each team must have at least two women. Call 401-596-2610.

COCKTAILS FOR A CAUSE

Pop on over to Pods Hilltop Café Thursday when Westerly Health Center will host "Cocktails for a Cause," a fundraiser to promote Alzheimer's awareness. Tickets are \$10 and include an appetizer buffet. All proceeds will benefit Alzheimer's Association.

MINECRAFT ADVENTURES

Join West Kingston native Sean Fay Wolfe, author of the "Unofficial Minecraft-Fan Adventure Series: The Elementia Chronicles," Thursday at 6 p.m. at the Westerly Public Library. He will discuss the ins and outs of being a teen author. There will be a book-signing after the talk.

FAIRY TALE TABLEAUX

Enjoy a viola and piano concert Sunday at the North Stonington Historical Society when Alison Holt and Aymeric Dupré la Tour present "Fairy Tale Tableaux, Childhood Scenes, and an Alpine Idyll" at the Stephen Main House in North Stonington. Two concerts, at 4 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. Tickets are \$20 per person and reservations are required. Call 860-599-3608 or Laurie at 860-245-5322.

— Nancy Burns-Fusaro

Surf gives back ring with a little help

Family wedding band unearthed at Westerly Town Beach



By Nancy Burns-Fusaro
Sun staff writer

WESTERLY — Ellen and Michael Stefanski had their share of losses last month, but following a visit from Keith Wille and his XP Deus, a little something meaningful was found.

The Stefanskis, who grew up in the Westerly-Stonington area and now live in San Diego, had come back home for the funeral of Michael's brother, Louis, a Stonington High School hall of famer and popular athlete who died unexpectedly in August at the age of 55. On their somber visit, they also lost a symbol of their love in the waters off the Westerly Town Beach.

That was after the funeral, and after the Stefanskis — who have been married for nearly 30 years — drove down Liberty Street in Pawcatuck to see an empty space instead of the church where they were married in November 1986.

They remembered that St. Michael's was slated for a renovation, but seeing the empty lot, they said, added to their grief.

Then, days later, despite Ellen's reservations, Michael hopped on an old 10-speed bike and pedaled to Westerly Town Beach to meet his niece Kaitlyn. He was registered for a charity swim back in San Diego and was de-



Groton resident Keith Wille, of the Ring Finders, found Michael Stefanski's wedding ring, above right, after Stefanski had lost it at Westerly Town Beach last month. | Photos submitted



Ellen and Michael Stefanski

termined to keep up with his training.

He wasn't 50 yards out, he recalled, when he had a "sinking feeling."

His wedding ring had slipped off his finger and disappeared in the ocean below.

No ordinary ring, Michael's wedding ring once belonged to his father, the late John Stefanski, and had been in the family for generations, Michael said.

When they were married, they used the same ring, inscribing their initials and wedding date, said Ellen, a 1969 Westerly High School graduate who changed

her last name from Barton to Stefanski when she married Michael.

Initially, Michael, a 1976 Stonington graduate, thought he could dive down and find the ring.

See Ring, A5

'Leaf' the beaten path for stunning foliage

Associated Press

The Northeast's fall foliage dazzles locals and draws millions of tourists, but many flock to the same tired vantage points.

Those willing to venture off the beaten path will be rewarded with stunning and comparatively uncrowded autumn vistas — and some killer selfies.

Here's your guide to the best corners of New England and upstate New York for leaf-peeping:

Rhode Island

For an urban leaf-peeping experience, there are few places more picturesque than historic Benefit Street in Providence, Rhode Island. Hundred-year-old elms and other mature trees

provide a canopy of spectacular color over brick sidewalks.

The mile-long street runs past a collection of Colonial, Federal and Greek Revival-style homes, and several historic churches, including the First Baptist Church in America. Situated midway up the steep College Hill, it offers occasional glimpses of a more modern downtown, the Rhode Island State House and rivers below. Above it is the main campus of Brown University, another lovely spot for fall color.

— Michelle R. Smith

Connecticut

The Heublein Tower in Sims-



Elms and other trees provide a canopy of color in the fall on historic Benefit Street in Providence. The mile-long street runs past a collection of Colonial, Federal and Greek Revival-style homes and several historic churches.

| N. Millard, GoProvidence via Associated Press

See Foliage, A5

INSIDE

Stonington sees mixed results in Smarter Balanced test scores. **A3**

Republicans vie for seats on Chariho School Committee. **A3**

Highs and lows: Stonington zoning eyes tweaks for digital age. **A4**

Westerly man dies after motorcycle crash on Potter Hill Road. **A5**

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Movies, **A7**
Obituaries, **A5**
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LOCAL



Westerly WARM Center holds Clambake. **A3**

FRONT PORCH NEWS



Florence Marie celebrates 100th birthday. **A8**

SPORTS



Connecticut runners win Surf town marathon. **B1**

NATION & WORLD



Campaign casts shadow over 9/11 anniversary. **B6**



High 75
Low 55

Weather: **B8**

123rd year, No. 35

\$1.00



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Local Deaths**HOUSTON, TEXAS****Stokes, Dorothy Walker**

The Westerly Sun publishes this list free of charge as a reader service. Additional information in the obituaries, death notices and funeral notices provided by the funeral homes allows the families to include, in paid space, the material they deem appropriate.

**Dorothy Walker Stokes**

HOUSTON, Texas — Dorothy Walker Stokes, formerly of Westerly, died peacefully Saturday, Aug. 27, 2016 at her home in Houston, Texas, after a lengthy battle with Alzheimer's disease.

She graduated from Westerly High School and met and married her husband during World War II while he was stationed at the Charlestown Naval Air Station. Dorothy worked as a nurse at Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston and also did private duty nursing. After retiring, she worked as a child care provider at Tallowood Baptist Church, of which she was a long-time member.

Dot was preceded in death by her husband, William (Bill) Stokes; her parents, John M. Walker Jr. and Mary Walker Robar; and her brother, John M. Walker III. She is survived by her daughters, Cheryl Zeitler (Lead Hill, Ariz.) and Catherine Stokes (Bellevue, Wash.); granddaughter, Jennifer (Trent) Ryan; and great-grandchildren, Colt, Cade, and Kira Ryan (Abernathy, Texas). She is also survived by her sisters, Kay Drake (Mystic, Conn.), Connie (Buba) Urso (Westerly, R.I.), and Carole (Joe) Cravinho, of Pearland, Texas; sisters-in-law, Liz Walker (Westerly, R.I.) and Martiel Kizer (Monroe, La.); and many nieces and nephews.

Special thanks to Grace Hospice of Texas for their support during this difficult time.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Alzheimer's research at www.alz.org; or Grace Hospice of Texas Donation Center, 2325 Timber Shadows Drive, Suite B, Kingwood, TX 77339.

Dot's ashes will be interred at a later date with her husband's in the Cremation Garden at Riverbend Cemetery.

Westerly man dies after motorcycle crashBy Jason Vallee
Sun staff writer

WESTERLY — A 58-year-old town man has died after police said he suffered fatal injuries in a motorcycle accident Friday along Potter Hill Road.

Eric L. Taivalantti, of 131 Potter Hill Road, was taken to Westerly Hospital with serious head and facial injuries following the crash, police said. Due to the nature of his injuries, he was transferred to Rhode Island Hospital in Providence by medical helicopter for further care and was pronounced dead around 8:30 p.m. Friday.

A graduate of the Chariho Regional Vocational Technical School, now the Career & Technical Center, Taivalantti was the owner of Division 7 Roof Consultants. He founded the Ashaway-based company in 1999.

Westerly police, fire and ambulance crews were called to 123 Potter Hill Road around 2:15 p.m. Friday with reports of a motorcycle accident with serious injuries.

Interim Westerly Police Chief Shawn Lacey said when officers arrived, they found Taivalantti lying face down on the side of the road without a pulse. An officer immediately began CPR and continued to work with Taivalantti until medics

with Westerly Ambulance arrived.

After re-establishing a pulse, he was taken to the Westerly Hospital emergency room and later transferred again, Lacey said. The Rhode Island Chief Medical Examiner is expected to conduct an autopsy Monday.

An investigation revealed that Taivalantti was traveling east on Potter Hill Road when witnesses said he lost control of the bike and both he and the bike fell in the area of 123 Potter Hill Road. The motorcycle then crossed the roadway, striking a large set of rocks near 123 Potter Hill Road. The impact threw Taivalantti nearly 20 feet and he crashed head-first into a nearby mailbox.

Lacey said the impact with the mailbox caused severe head and facial trauma which likely resulted in his death. He was not wearing a helmet at the time.

Witnesses reported seeing Taivalantti traveling east along Potter Hill Road at a high rate of speed before the accident. According to the police report, witnesses saw him pass two cars before later seeing him at the accident scene. Those who reported he passed the cars did not witness the crash.

The exact cause of the accident is unknown, police said, and the case remains under investigation.

jvallee@thewesterlysun.com

>> Foliage**From A1**

bury, Connecticut sits at the top of Talcott Mountain State Park.

The 165-foot tower was built in 1914 by liquor magnate Gilbert Heublein as a summer home and offers spectacular views that on a clear day extend north to the Berkshires in Massachusetts and south to Long Island Sound.

Getting to the tower involves a relatively easy 1¼-mile hike up a foliage-filled trail that winds up the mountain with plenty of overlooks of the Farmington River Valley. There's also a nearby pumpkin patch where visitors can enjoy hayrides and pumpkin picking.

Maine

Nestled in tiny Turner in the foothills of Maine, Ricker Hill Orchards combines two of New England's most beloved autumn activities:

picking your own apples and admiring the turning leaves. The orchard's hillside "u-pick" area offers a stunning view of Maine's western lakes and mountains region, with views of foliage stretching all the way to New Hampshire.

The ninth-generation orchard also offers fall staples such as cider and cider doughnuts along with its apples and views. It's about an hour's drive north of Portland — a ride with its own superb views of the fall spectacle.

Massachusetts

Most people associate Cape Cod with summer, sand and surf, but the peninsula offers some postcard-perfect backdrops for foliage.

Cross over the Sagamore Bridge and take the first exit onto rural Route 6A, which winds and twists through the scenic and historic town of

Sandwich. The Old King's Highway, as it used to be known, hugs Cape Cod Bay and is lined with ancient stone walls, white picket fences, ponds and pastures.

Two worthwhile stops in Sandwich: Heritage Museums and Gardens, where you can meander paths bordered by stunning flora; and the Green Briar Nature Center, next to the conservation area where Thornton Burgess dreamed up Peter Rabbit and other characters.

New Hampshire

Don't want to limit your leaf-peeping to a single state — or, for that matter — country? Head to Milan State Park, where a fire tower offers simultaneous views of the mountain ranges of New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont and Canada.

Brilliant leaves in the foreground contrast beautifully with fog that

settles in the valleys and the mountains in the distance. The recently renovated park, about 125 miles north of the state capital of Concord, includes a hilltop campground with a half-dozen campsites and four furnished yurts available to rent through Oct. 24. Oh, and it's pronounced MY'-lin, not mi-LAHN'.

New York

In the southern Adirondacks, the stony Sacandaga River and a series of forest-rimmed lakes reflect blazing orange and yellow leaves along a 50-mile stretch of Route 30 from Northville to Indian Lake, where the Great Adirondack Moose Festival is slated for Sept. 24-25.

There are long stretches of unbroken wilderness between the hamlets of Wells, Speculator and Indian Lake, with hiking trails leading to secluded ponds, waterfalls and small mountains with big views.

>> Ring**From A1**

For the next 45 minutes, he swam back and forth, "hoping and praying I might spot the ring or a reflection off the ring from the sun," without success.

He got back on his bike and began the long ride back to town, dreading having to share the news with his wife.

"I couldn't stop thinking about how the ring had now been in the family for a couple generations and that I was the one to lose it," Michael recalled, "not to mention how my wife would react ... the ring was not only the representation of our love for one another but also part of our family history."

"We were both heartbroken at the loss," said Ellen. "There was a huge amount of sentimental value attached to the ring — something so very special that could never be replaced."

But when Michael sat down at the computer and Googled "waterproof metal detector rentals," he came across a web site called theringfinders.com and a man named Keith Wille, and his hope came alive.

The Ring Finders Directory, a group of metal-detection enthusiasts with members in most of the United States, and more than 20 countries, is dedicated to finding lost items at little or no cost. Wille, a Groton resi-

dent and a member since he first found out about the organization, has had excellent luck finding lost items and returning them to their owners. He works on a reward basis and accepts what his clients believe his services are worth. Occasionally he has to charge for extraordinary travel or equipment expenses, like the rental of scuba equipment or ferry or plane tickets.

"I'd never heard of anybody doing this type of work," said Michael, pleased to see that Wille was "fairly local."

"I read his blog and suddenly got the feeling that there might be some hope," said Michael, who contacted Wille immediately via email.

"Keith responded very quickly and also conveyed his sympathy for our losses ... of my brother Lou and the wedding ring," said Michael, "and he assured me that he has had success retrieving rings in water."

Because Michael had to return to San Diego, Wille agreed to meet the Stefanskis at the beach on the morning before Michael's flight.

"We didn't hold out much hope," added Ellen, "but couldn't pass up a chance to at least try."

Once the Stefanskis met Wille in person, their confidence grew.

Wille, said Michael, was "clean-cut, professional, in good shape, and military looking."

A survival training instructor and leadership development expert, Wille, 29, trains military personnel and pilots in New London. He has been interested in finding lost items since he was a young teenager and heard stories about the 19th-century silver dollars lost behind the walls of his grandparents' house. He eventually found that roll of coins using a 10-foot curtain rod with a large spoon taped to the end. His detective work led him to metal detectors which eventually led him to connect with the Ring Finders.

Today he owns an XP Deus wireless metal detector and when people find him, he does his best to recover whatever the lost item may be, which means, mostly rings.

He says he searches for lost items mostly for the satisfaction of the reunion.

"Sometimes all people have is a token to remind them of the best parts of their lives," he said, "those memories do not belong lost in the ocean."

The stories attached to these rings mean the world to the bearer and if spending a couple of cold and tired hours in the ocean is what I have to do to return that token to them, then sign me up," he said.

Back at Westerly Town Beach, the Stefanskis met Wille and Michael showed him where he lost the ring before Ellen drove him to Warwick

for his flight to San Diego. On the drive, Michael and Ellen, who had planned to stay behind for a few more days, talked about their meeting with Wille and agreed they had faith in him.

Not long after Michael checked his bags and made his way through security, he heard his phone ping with a text message alert. It was from Wille. He looked down to see a picture of his lost ring. Wille also sent the text to Ellen who was driving back to Westerly.

After seeing the text she drove straight to the beach to meet Wille and get the ring.

"Needless to say we were thrilled beyond words," said Ellen.

"Keith took our loss to heart," said Michael.

"Returning a ring to someone who thought they would never see it again is priceless," said Wille, who married his wife, Allie, last Christmas Day. "Especially seeing the happy tears in their eyes or hearing the crack in their voice upon returning it to their finger. It hurts me to know that a person was in pain while their ring was lost, but after it's returned the emotional celebration is overwhelming to watch."

For more information, visit theringfinders.com/Keith.Wille.

nbfusaro@thewesterlysun.com

>> ACLU**From A1**

torney Matthew Oliverio.

The council has wrestled with how to handle citizens' comments for about three years since Robert Lombardo, a lawyer and frequent critic of local governmental operations, started using the podium in Council Chambers at Town Hall to lodge a range of complaints con-

cerning council members, town managers, town attorneys and others.

Lombardo has consistently raised questions about Finance Director Deb Bridgham's credentials. Under Lombardo's questioning during a Town Council meeting in January, Town Manager Derrick M. Kennedy acknowledged that Bridgham does not have a college degree and that her highest level of academic achievement was to obtain a General Educational Development (GED) certificate.

More recently Lombardo, speaking during the citizens' comments segment of the council's July 18 meeting, questioned Town Clerk Donna Giordano's understanding of the state Access to Public Records Act. In her capacity as the town's designated APRA official, Giordano oversees the town's response to all requests for documents made under the state law.

Lombardo was initially nonplussed by the proposed policy.

"This preposterous rule change rendered me speechless," he said, going on to praise the ACLU for its swift intervention.

"I want to commend Steven Brown for promptly putting the council on notice this policy would raise serious First Amendment concerns and would weaken the role and purpose of having public comment at these meetings in the first place," Lombardo said.

The council is slated to discuss the proposed rule change, which would affect the citizens' comments segment of its meetings, this evening during a workshop meeting scheduled for 6 at Town Hall. The public will have an opportunity to discuss the proposed policy during the council's regular meeting, which follows at 7 p.m.

Silvestri predicted the proposed policy would not be adopted by the council.

"I don't think there's enough support for that as written. I'm sure there will be a complete discussion," Silvestri said.

The council will take up the proposed change less than three weeks after receiving a presentation on the state's Open Meeting Act and APRA by Lisa Pinsonneault, a special assistant attorney general in the state Office of the Attorney General. The

language of the prosed rule change came as a surprise to Silvestri.

"I think it was pretty clear, after the council heard from the attorney general's office, that while the council has the right to ask citizens to avoid derogatory comments and to maintain respect and decorum, we can't require it."

While the council can "set reasonable restrictions on how the public comment period is conducted, and certainly can prohibit disruptive behavior," the proposed change "is an overly broad and content-based restriction that undermines free speech rights," Brown said in his letter. He went on to cite a U.S. Supreme Court finding that "it is a prized American privilege to speak one's mind, although not always with perfect good taste, on all public institutions, and this opportunity is to be afforded for vigorous advocacy no less than abstract discussion." The court issued the statement as part of its ruling in the landmark *Sullivan v. New York Times* case from 1964, which is widely viewed as having bolstered freedom of speech and freedom of the press principles.

When the Providence School

Board adopted a policy barring members of the general public from mentioning the name of any person during the public comment portion of school board meetings, the ACLU obtained a court-issued restraining order against the school committee, Brown said. Previous town councils in Westerly have attempted and often succeeded in enforcing the

same ban on the use of individuals' names. The Tiverton School Committee rescinded a similar policy barring the public from orally initiating charges or complaints against school employees during the public comment period of its meetings after a challenge from the ACLU, Brown said.

dfaulkner@thewesterlysun.com

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