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The HIGHLANDS Current

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Marijuana Shop Opens in Beacon

'Showcase' allows customers to meet growers

By Michael Turton

The police station building at 463 Main St. in Beacon, which operated from 1913 to 1996, was known in the 1950s to some residents as “the joint,” a reference to the holding cells where miscreants might spend the night.

As of Sept. 22, it has been a weekend source of joints, welcoming customers to a temporary retail operation that legally sells cannabis products.

New York State has issued 463 licenses for

retail dispensaries since the sale of recreational marijuana for adults was legalized in 2021. That includes 44 licenses to operators based in the Mid-Hudson region. But so far, just 23 dispensaries have opened statewide, forcing farmers and companies making edibles and other products to sit on their inventory.

(The state Office of Cannabis Management has so far only issued licenses to operators with previous marijuana convictions, but the application process opens to the general public on Wednesday, Oct. 4.)

The Station is one of more than 20 state-approved “showcases,” an interim system

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Project Director Theresa Dobrash, owners Kamel and Lena Jamal and Creative Director Mallory Lemieux pose outside at The Station in Beacon, which sells marijuana on weekends.

Photo by M. Turton

Philipstown Gives Initial Approval to North Highlands Subdivision

Town Board could hold conservation easement

By Liz Schevtchuk Armstrong

Nearly 10 years after it first came before the Philipstown Planning Board, the Hudson Highlands Reserve subdivision last week received preliminary approval.

Several steps remain for the developers before construction can begin on the upscale mini-village, which would consist of 24 homes on a 210-acre property bounded by Horton Road, East Mountain

Road North and Route 9, in North Highlands near the Dutchess County line.

In a 6-4 vote on Sept. 21 at Town Hall, the Planning Board adopted a resolution declaring that the project can move ahead, allowing the developer, Horton Road LLC, to pursue further approvals from the Town Board, county and state.

Horton Road LLC proposed its project as a “conservation subdivision,” a designation that permits a developer, in return for protecting natural features, to enjoy certain benefits, such as building more structures than would usually be allowed. In addition,

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Part I: Autism at School

Teaching Across the Spectrum

As the number of children diagnosed with autism grows, public schools and parents struggle to provide them with the best possible education

By Joey Asher

In 2019, when Eric Perry-Herrera turned 4, his parents wanted him to enter kindergarten at the Garrison School, near their home.

But because Eric was on the autism spectrum, the district wanted to send him to a special-needs class in the Hendrick Hudson district, near Buchanan.

“They said they didn’t have the resources,” said Eric’s mother, Brenda Perry-Herrera, who now lives in Fairfax, Virginia. “This was against our wishes. We thought he needed to be with neurotypical peers.”

Eric’s case illustrates a challenge for smaller districts such as Garrison (220 students) and Haldane (800). As more children are diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, or neurodivergent, districts struggle to provide an education equivalent to children without serious disabilities in the “least restrictive environment,” as required by state law.

As a result, these schools often outsource special-needs students to larger districts. Doing otherwise, and providing expensive services in-house to relatively few children, could wreak havoc on tight budgets that are limited by state-mandated property-tax caps.

No matter how you approach it, educating children with autism spectrum disorder adds many challenges for

teachers and parents. The bio-neurological disability includes symptoms such as difficulty with communication and social interactions, obsessive interests, repetitive behaviors and an inability to transition to different tasks.

The number of students diagnosed with autism has grown substantially over the past two decades. Nationally, 1 in 150 children was diagnosed with autism in 2000, compared to 1 in 36 today, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In New York, 1 percent of special-needs students were diagnosed with autism in 1997, compared to 11 percent today, according to the state Education Department.

These increases have been driven largely by awareness and advocacy, said Dr. Gazi Azad, a clinical psychologist at the Center for Autism and the Developing Brain at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital in White Plains.

Better diagnostic tools allow parents and clinicians to get “better at finding kids that we may have missed,” Azad said. In addition, “parents are speaking up.”

Regina Kaishian, Haldane’s director of pupil personnel services, said that 12 percent of the district’s 140 special-needs students are on the autism spectrum, up from 8 percent in 2011. Garrison has

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Autism *(from Page 1)*

several students on the autism spectrum or who are neurodivergent, said Allison Emig, the principal.

The two districts this year began offering joint classes for neurodivergent children. “The answer for the future for small districts is collaboration,” said Kaishian. Haldane also added a class for up to 12 students in kindergarten, first and second grade with a special-education teacher and two aides.

Kaishian said that Haldane accepts students from other districts, including Garrison, although all five current students are from Haldane. “There is something to be said for keeping children in the district or close to their home community,” she said.

At the same time, Garrison added a class for neurodivergent children in grades 2 to 4 that includes two students from Haldane, said Emig.

That class has made a difference for 7-year-old John Paul Peralta, who can now go to school for the first time with his Garrison peers, said his mother, Guadalupe.

Peralta said her family moved to Garrison two years ago and found that the district wasn’t able to help her son, whose challenges include hyperactivity, attention deficit, speech delays and behavioral troubles.

“They didn’t have all the things that special kids need,” she said. Instead, the district sent John Paul to Hendrick Hudson.

“He only lasted three months,” Peralta said. “His behavior was getting worse.” She said John Paul would jump on chairs, disrupt the class and refuse to listen.

She considered a program in Yorktown Heights operated by the Putnam/Northern Westchester Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). “I cried a lot,” she said. “There were many kids yelling and screaming. The place looked like a jail.”

Last year, John Paul received 16 hours a week of occupational and speech therapy at the Garrison School. This year he attends Garrison’s newly formed special-education



Guadalupe Peralta with her son, John Paul, who is a student at the Garrison School

class. He loves riding the bus with his classmates, said his mother. “He even said on Sunday that he wanted to go to school.”

Peralta added that John Paul is making progress. “He’s speaking more. He’s asking for more things. It’s unbelievable.”

Many needs

Districts are required to provide an Individual Education Program (IEP) for each student identified with a serious learning or physical disability. The plans are routinely revisited and must be approved by the school board. The state Department of Education also has outlined a “continuum of services” that districts must provide special-needs

range of challenging and disruptive behaviors, such as walking out of class, throwing tantrums and self-harm. Behaviorists work to minimize those behaviors.

Consider an elementary school student who couldn’t finish worksheets without shouting at the teacher. “Teachers would say: ‘Never mind, you don’t have to do the work. Just sit here and read,’” said Faughnan. But the child was able to change his behavior when he was offered computer time as a reward.

Motivators have changed over the years, she said. “When I started my career, it was all food — M&Ms and chips. Now it’s always technology.”

Leif Albright, who coordinates the Applied Behavior Analysis programs at Manhattanville College in Purchase, describes behavioral analysis as “operant conditioning. If you do this, you can earn that.”

But the technique has its critics.



Jen Ostrow with her sons, Jake (left) and Alex, who are students at Haldane

Photos by J. Asher

students, including special-education teachers “embedded” in general-education classrooms, separate special-education classes and resource rooms.

Offering that continuum for every student at every age is a challenge, said Kaishian. Even with 13 special-education teachers, a full-time and a part-time psychologist, two social workers, an occupational therapist, two speech therapists and a behaviorist, Haldane sends seven children out of district, not including the two who attend Garrison.

Garrison has five special-education teachers, a physical therapist, an occupational therapist and a speech therapist, and places five children out of district.

The Wappinger Central School District, which has 10,000 students, including 1,700 with special needs, has 300 special-education teachers, 20 speech therapists, 10 occupational therapists and 20 psychologists, said Julia Montoya, director of special education.

That team allows Wappingers to serve nearly all of its special-needs students. “We try our best to keep them here,” she said. But the district still sends 250 children out of district.

That’s partly because every special-education student has specific needs, depending on the nature and severity of his or her disabilities. “The idea that [autism] is a spectrum is very true,” said Kaishian at Haldane. “It’s such a range.”

That’s true of Jake and Alex Ostrow, brothers who attend Haldane. Each is on the spectrum but has distinct challenges, according to their parents, Gene and Jen Ostrow.

Jake, who is 14 and in eighth grade, “has issues socializing with kids his age,” said Jen Ostrow. “During tests he gets very anxious and down on himself.” She added that “when he gets angry, he has issues with self-control, like how to calm himself down.”

By contrast, Alex, 10, is something of a “Jekyll and Hyde,” said his mother. “You could see him one day as happy and outgoing. Then, all of a sudden, you turn around and he’s yelling and using colorful language and dropping chairs to the floor and throwing things.”

Both Jake and Alex attend “integrated co-taught” general-education classes with embedded special-education teachers. Alex also attends smaller classes for math and English and Jake has access to a resource room. His parents say they are happy with the education their sons are receiving at Haldane.

Educators in the Haldane and Garrison districts say they want to offer more services and keep more children within the districts.

“We’re thinking through how we build out this shared continuum,” said Emig, who hopes to add special classes for students in grades 5 to 8 that could be shared with Haldane and other districts. Haldane would like “more targeted specialized instruction in small groups,” said Kashian. The question is, “how can we do that with our small staff?”

NEXT WEEK:

When parents believe a district falls short

‘Behaviorism’: Can It Help?

Counselors work to reduce disruptions at school

By Joey Asher

When Haldane students returned to school following the pandemic shutdown, 8-year-old Alex Ostrow stood outside on the sidewalk, refusing to budge. Like many children on the autism spectrum, Alex was nervous about returning to an environment where he wasn’t comfortable.

Samantha Faughnan, the district’s newly hired behavioral analyst, had a suggestion: Alex could bring something familiar from home, such as his plushies of Mario and Luigi, the video game characters. “It worked,” said Jen Ostrow.

Autistic children can exhibit a wide

“They’re trying to make us act like non-autistic people, rather than understanding why we act the way we do,” said Zoe Gross, director of advocacy for the Autistic Self Advocacy Network. She said the technique is especially galling because it resembles how you train a pet. “They give the kid a command and say, ‘Good girl,’ and give the kid a treat,” she said. “It can be hard to watch.”

Faughnan recoils at the comparison to animal training. “There’s so much more to it,” she said. “We’re not just training them like dogs.”

For example, she said she consults closely with students, family and teachers to understand motivators. She described a student who was in danger of failing because he refused to do homework. When she asked what he wanted, he said he wanted to design videogames. “I said, ‘How can we help you get there? What are you willing to do to get there?’” Faughnan recalled.

Melanie Pagano, one of two behaviorists in the Wappingers Central School District, said another part of the job is coaching parents. She described an elementary student who would leave class without warning, throw tantrums and once even injured a teaching assistant.

Exasperated, the child’s mother would take away computer privileges for weeks at a time, only to have her child throw more tantrums.

In response, Pagano set up a chart where the child earned points for categories such as “following directions the first time,” “finishing my work,” “transitioning away from activities when asked” and “keeping appropriate voice volume.” With that structure, the student improved, she said.

Pagano also helped the mother see that, for her child with autism, the tantrums are a form of communication, not disrespect. “Once you understand that, you develop patience,” she said.

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Part II: Autism at School

Teaching Across the Spectrum

If parents don't believe their child is getting the education he or she deserves, they must confront a highly regulated system.

By Joey Asher

State and federal laws entitle every child who has a physical or cognitive disability to a “free and appropriate public education” in the “least restrictive environment.”

But if a child has autism, and parents don't feel a public school district is reaching that standard, they may have to battle to get it.

Last year, Elliot Mister entered the prekindergarten program at Glenham Elementary School in the Beacon district with an undiagnosed case of autism spectrum disorder. “His teacher almost immediately started pulling me aside,” recalled his father, Andy. “They were

calling the security guard because he was trying to run away.”

That surprised his parents because Elliot had not had similar issues at summer camp or preschool at The Randolph School in Wappingers Falls.

To get help from the district, Elliot's parents said they sent dozens of emails, talked repeatedly with teachers and administrators and spent \$1,400 on a special-education advocate. Finally, they

filed a complaint with the state Education Department.

(Because of privacy laws, school officials and teachers cannot comment on specific children. However, *The Current* attempted multiple times to speak to Beacon Superintendent Matt Landahl and Heather Chadwell Dennis, the assis-

tant superintendent for pupil personnel services, who oversees special education, about the services the district provides to neurodivergent children. Each declined to comment.)

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Getting the Feet Back to Main Street

First Friday and Second Saturday struggle to rebound after pandemic

By Marc Ferris

In the wake of the pandemic shutdown, efforts to revitalize First Friday in Cold Spring and Second Saturday in Beacon — events designed to entice visitors and shoppers — have been spotty and foot traffic in general is down, said shop owners surveyed during a walk down both Main Streets.

In Cold Spring, the Chamber of Commerce promotes First Fridays, encouraging stores to stay open late and hold special sales or events. Before the pandemic, the chamber handed out orange flags for merchants to place outside their shops to signal their participation. It also prints posters.

Earlier this month, on Sept. 1, only three shops displayed the flags and most stores closed at their regular time. Last year, First Friday ran from May to October; this year it ended a month earlier.

“It's really an art gallery thing, but there aren't many left in Cold Spring,” said Martee Levi of Buster Levi Gallery at 121 Main St.

On Sept. 1, Levi served wine, cheese and sweets as a dozen people milled about inside the gallery and on the sidewalk. Studio

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St. Mary's Again Faces Precipice

For third time in 10 years, church says end is near

By Michael Turton

The Rev. Steve Schunk, the priest-in-charge at St. Mary's in Cold Spring, said on Sept. 27 the Episcopal church may close in 2024 if its finances don't improve dramatically, putting its expansive lawn at the corner of Main Street and Chestnut Avenue in jeopardy.

The 1.5-acre great lawn serves as an unofficial village green, hosting winter tobogganers, the annual Halloween parade, craft fairs and other community events.

Schunk said St. Mary's has a \$50,000 gap in its 2024 budget, which includes \$180,000 to \$200,000 in expenses. Sixty percent covers utilities, insurance and upkeep for the 155-year-old church and three buildings; 30 percent provides minimal pay for clergy and staff; and 10 percent is sent as dues to the Episcopal Diocese of New York. In addition, Schunk said the church and buildings need an estimated \$3 million in repairs and upgrades.

In a meeting on Sept. 27, Schunk and senior warden Vincent Tamagna identified three paths for the church, with the preferred scenario being the solicitation of

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The great lawn, with St. Mary's Church, on an October afternoon

Photo by M. Turton

High Rates Depress Local Housing Market

Buyers, sellers pull back as borrowing costs rise

By Leonard Sparks

Interest rates on mortgages fell below 3 percent during the first year of the pandemic shutdown, helping to fuel a frenzy that accelerated home sales in Beacon and Philipstown and drove rising prices even higher.

Now, with the rate on a 30-year fixed mortgage exceeding 7 percent, the highest level in 23 years, home sales are slowing and prices cooling as potential buyers recoil at taking on higher monthly payments, according to local real-estate agents.

The most recent quarterly report from the Hudson Gateway Association of Realtors, covering April to June, concluded that “affordability challenges” were limiting the market in Putnam County, where sales fell 17.4 percent from the same period in 2022.

Those challenges, according to the report, included “elevated sales prices and higher borrowing costs,” and the decision by “would-be sellers with low-rate mortgages” to stay on the sidelines “in hopes market conditions will improve.”

About 35 percent fewer single-family homes sold in Beacon and Philipstown during the 12-month period that ended Aug. 31 than the year before, according to

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Autism *(from Page 1)*

In February, six months after he began school, Elliot began spending two hours a day with a special-education teacher who set up a reward system with goals and stickers. He also started receiving occupational and speech therapy.

"It totally helped," said Andy Mister. But getting there "was Kafkaesque."

That kind of experience is typical for many parents of neurodivergent children, said Victoria Sanjuan, the family's Poughkeepsie-based advocate. "Beacon didn't do anything terrible," she said.

Triesha Edwards, another special-education advocate, noted that there is space for the education advocacy industry because "special education is highly regulated and parents don't know how to navigate it."

Further, autism can sometimes be challenging to diagnose because it manifests in complex and varied ways. "When a child has a diagnosis of cerebral palsy, it is fairly obvious," said Edwards, who is based in Ulster County. "For a child with autism, it's not always as clear-cut."

The number of children diagnosed as autistic is growing. Nationally, 1 in 150 children received the diagnosis in 2000, compared to 1 in 36 today, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In New York, 1 percent of special-needs students were diagnosed with autism in 1997, compared to 11 percent today, according to the state Education Department.

That has put financial pressure on school districts, especially smaller ones, because they must provide specialized services to more children but cannot raise taxes above a state-mandated cap without widespread community support. One result is an unregulated industry of advocates that has arisen to help families negotiate with districts for services, said Marie Lewis, clinical director of the National Special Education Advocacy Institute, near Philadelphia.

Lewis estimates there are as many as 10,000 advocates nationwide; rates range from \$50 to \$250 an hour. Many are parents who were trained on the job while advocating for their own children. *The Current* spoke to four advocates; each said that more than half of their cases involve autism spectrum disorder.

Case studies

Leilani Rodriguez said she moved from Port Chester to the Highlands because the Westchester County district's schools lacked occupational therapists to help her autistic son. By contrast, she said, "The special education people in Beacon were amazing."

She has since moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for work, and said she is frustrated that the Individualized Education Program developed for her son in Beacon has not completely carried forward there. Specifically, the district won't provide her son with door-to-door service on a small bus. Unlike in Beacon, her son must ride a larger bus, which "overwhelms him," she said. So, her husband drives their son to and from school each day.

Bryanna Mehling said the Beacon district has been a "very good partner" in helping her neurodivergent child. But it took more



Andy Mister and his wife, Alex McQuilken, with their children Elliot (left) and Sunday

Photo by J. Asher

than six months to get her elementary schooler a specialized iPad that helps non-verbal students communicate. If a child wants lunch, she can touch an icon that says she's hungry. Or if the child is angry, there are buttons to indicate moods.

Obtaining the "augmentative and alternative communication device" was delayed while the district looked for an agency to evaluate her child for the device, Mehling said. "Everything has to go through a process."

Mehling said she paid an advocate \$2,200 to help persuade the district to provide additional therapy with the device, as well as other services. "I don't know how we afforded it, to be honest," she said.

Since Elliot Mister's autism was not diagnosed before he entered school, he had to start from scratch, getting tested, meeting with the district's Committee on Preschool Special Education, creating an Individualized Education Program, and then assembling the service providers necessary to execute the IEP.

His case was also complicated because, at the pre-K level, Beacon had no classes for special-needs children like Elliot. So the district had to search, unsuccessfully, outside of the district for a placement, said Sanjuan, the family's advocate. "Out-of-district searches are always a debacle," she said.

In April, the state Education Department, after hearing the Mister family's complaint, awarded "compensatory services" because of what it ruled was the Beacon district's initial failure to provide 10 hours a week with a special-education teacher as required under Elliot's IEP.

In the last five years, according to the Education Department, parents have filed nearly 1,600 complaints against districts they believe are not providing their children the free and appropriate public education required by law. There have also been 80,000 hearings to resolve disputes with local districts.

Those figures include a handful of complaints from parents in the Highlands and a few hearings, as well as settlements reached after frustrated parents threatened to sue. These settlement agreements are typically only available through Freedom of Infor-

mation Law requests, with names redacted.

The Current has obtained a few through that process. In 2020, the Haldane district in Cold Spring agreed to reimburse the parents of a special-needs student \$41,350 for three years of private-school tuition and up to \$15,000 for counseling, transportation and attorney's fees. In 2019, the district paid the parents of a student \$70,000, as well as half the tuition at a private school, up to \$34,026 annually.

In the latter case, the parents agreed to allow the student to be evaluated and observed at the private school by members of the Haldane Committee on Special Education to develop an IEP, as required by law.

In 2017, an investigation concluded that the Beacon district had failed to provide a high school student with an appropriate public education and reached a settlement with his mother, Melissa Thompson, a former Beacon school board president. She had filed her complaint not with the state but with the federal Office for Civil Rights on behalf of her son, who is Black. She alleged teachers did not fulfill the requirements of his learning plan.


The agreement stipulated that the district provide training to all administrators, teachers and counselors, as well as IEP managers, on implementing learning plans for students with disabilities. At the time, Thompson called that component a "critical piece" of the settlement.


After all their efforts in Beacon, the Misters moved this summer to Vestal, near Binghamton. There, the district wanted to give Elliot only 30 minutes a day with a special-education teacher, so the family hired another advocate to help negotiate an IEP with two hours a day, as well as physical, speech and occupational therapy.

"It seems OK," Andy Mister said. "But we had to fight for it."

For Part I of this series, see highlandscurrent.org.

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