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Beacon Council Pivots on Cease-fire

Members likely to vote on resolution Monday

By Jeff Simms

One week after hearing 50 residents, most of them from Beacon, speak for more than two and a half hours, the City Council reversed course and during its Feb. 26 workshop drafted a resolution calling for “an immediate and permanent cease-fire” in Gaza. The council is expected to vote on the resolution on Monday (March 4).

If approved, the resolution will be sent to

President Joe Biden, as well as other elected officials who represent Beacon and the Highlands: U.S. Sens. Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, U.S. Rep. Pat Ryan, Gov. Kathy Hochul, state Sen. Rob Rolison and state Assembly Member Jonathan Jacobson.

The resolution’s final copy was released midday Thursday and acknowledges the “deep personal impact” the war has had on community members. It suggests the city can help ease pain and division “through a statement of shared understanding and advocacy for the desires of the community to be heard.”

It condemns discrimination, harass-

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CELEBRATION OF LIGHT — Beacon residents celebrated the Year of the Dragon on Feb. 24 with an evening parade with lanterns on Main Street. For more photos, see highlandscurrent.org.

Photo by Ross Corsair

Beacon School District Proposes \$49 Million Plan

Capital project would mean tax increase

By Jeff Simms

The Beacon City School District has proposed a \$49 million capital project, its largest in years, for district residents to consider when they vote on the 2024-25 budget and elect three school board members in May.

The proposal would fund sweeping improvements at all six of the district’s school buildings, with the work to be completed in the summers of 2026, 2027

and 2028. If approved, it would also be the first school capital project to trigger a property tax increase in at least 15 years.

Before being added to the May 21 ballot, the school board must approve the plan, which is expected to happen at its March 18 meeting.

The district estimates that a home valued at \$300,000 would see a \$127 annual tax increase. With the state STAR exemption, which affords homeowners savings on school taxes, the increase would be \$114, and it would be \$91 for seniors enrolled in the Enhanced STAR program. The tax

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Part I

The Good Death

Many residents of the Highlands have embraced the “death-positive” movement, which hopes to shape the endings of our stories.

By Joey Asher

When a doctor told Lisette Cheresson’s family that their mother was no longer eligible for a liver transplant, they decided to take her home immediately.

“The doctor was flabbergasted,” says Cheresson, a Beacon resident whose mother died in 2018 in North Carolina. “He said: ‘Are you sure? We can keep her alive.’”

“We had to honor what we promised her,” she recalls. “Mom didn’t want to die in a hospital.”

They hired a private ambulance to take her home that evening. Family members were at her bedside when she died the next morning.

“It was one of the most profoundly beautiful moments of my life,” says Cheresson. “It is transcendent when people are given an opportunity to experience these sacred intimate moments in ways that are meaningful to them.”

As part of a growing movement that has been described as “death positive,” people in the Highlands and around the country are looking for ways to embrace life’s final moments and turn death into something

beautiful and meaningful. The movement is driven by death doulas, podcasters, hospices, writers, singers, funeral directors and “death café” facilitators.

In part motivated by her experience with her mother, Cheresson joined an army of doulas, also known as death midwives, who help families talk openly about dying and individuals achieve a “good death.”

Hudson Valley Hospice, which serves Dutchess and Ulster counties, has trained about 80 end-of-life doulas since 2017, said Lisa Wilson, a spokesperson. Wilson said the doulas help plan and manage the final days of patients’ lives to ensure they have a good death, including the friends, music and even smells they want present in their final moments. “They talk with them about how they want the end to go,” she says.

Doulas also help with legacy projects such as farewell videos and letters. She says a doula helped a Fishkill woman in her 90s assemble a board of photographs to be displayed at her wake.

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Illustration by Jon Krause

Ashes to Ashes

Cremation has become as common as burial — or you could be composted

By Joey Asher

When Anthony Calabrese of the Clinton Funeral Home in Cold Spring became a funeral director 20 years ago, about 10 percent of people opted to be cremated after they died. Today, he says, it's about 50 percent.

That is consistent with the experience of other local funeral directors, as well as nationwide. The National Funeral Directors Association says 60 percent of bodies are cremated and that figure is expected to top 80 percent by 2045.

In addition, the association estimates that 8 percent of burials are “green,” where the body is interred without embalming and permitted to decompose naturally, sometimes without a casket. Nationwide, it says 60 percent of people showed interest in that option in 2022, up 5 percent from the year before. (Locally, funeral directors say they've collectively had only a handful of such requests.)

One of the challenges with green burials is the limited number of “natural” cemeteries that allow them, although over the past five years they have doubled to about 200, according to a green burial directory at the site US Funerals Online.

The closest dedicated green cemeteries to the Highlands are in Sleepy Hollow and Rhinebeck, and Wappingers Rural Cemetery has a green burial section.

Bill Halvey of Straub, Catalano and Halvey in Wappingers Falls is the only local director who has had a request for human composting, which became legal in New York in 2022. The body is placed in a container with straw, alfalfa and woodchips, he says, and over about three months, microbes transform the body into about a cubic yard of compost.

Because New York has no facilities that compost the deceased, Halvey sent the body to Washington, one of five other states that allow the practice.



After experiencing her mother's death, Lisette Cheresson of Beacon became a doula to assist others with the process.

Photo by J. Asher



Ryan Biracree, a Desmond-Fish librarian, runs regular death cafés in Garrison.

Photo provided

The Good Death

(from Page 1)

Words and music

Talking about death is the idea behind the death café that Ryan Biracree began last summer at the Desmond-Fish Public Library in Garrison, where he works as the digital services librarian. “Discuss death, dying and the dead — with tea and cake,” read his promotion for a session held Feb. 25. (The next one is March 17.)

Since 2011, there have been more than 17,600 such gatherings worldwide, according to deathcafe.com, a site created by Jon Underwood in London after he was inspired by “café mortals” held at bistros in Geneva by a Swiss sociologist, Bernard Crettaz. When Underwood died suddenly in 2017 at age 44, his mother and sister took over. (Underwood also founded a consumer site for people to review funeral directors.) The first death café in the U.S. took place in Columbus, Ohio, in 2012.

“Death cafés allow people space to talk about things without getting weird looks from family and friends,” says Biracree. The sessions typically draw 20 to 30 people.

Rather than talking, singing to the dying

is the idea behind the Threshold Choir, co-founded 10 years ago by Cat Guthrie, a Garrison singer-songwriter. The choir visits the bedsides of the sick and dying to perform a repertoire that might include “We Are All Walking Each Other Home,” “Rest Easy” and “I Am Giving You Light.”

The first Threshold Choir sang in California in 2000; today there are more than 200 worldwide. Guthrie's choir sings twice a month at bedsides around the Hudson Valley, including at the Rosary Hill Home for terminal cancer patients in Hawthorne.

“Music puts you in a different place,” says Guthrie, who, along with other family members, “sang out” to her parents when each died years ago. “We have stepped away from being present for people when they are sick and dying,” she says.

Death positive

The term *death positive* was coined by Caitlin Doughty, a podcaster who runs a Los Angeles funeral home and created a site called The Order of the Good Death. “Why are there a zillion websites and references to being sex-positive and nothing for being death-positive?” she tweeted in 2013.

More broadly, the movement to provide good deaths dates at least to the 1970s, when hospices and palliative care took hold to aid the dying process. “In America, we don't handle death very well,” says Wilson

at Hudson Valley Hospice. “Hospice is a way of helping people die a death with dignity.”

Patrick Halvey, director of the Riverview Funeral Home by Halvey in Beacon, sees the death-positive movement as a throw-back to the home funerals that his grandfather managed when he started the business in the 1930s. In those days, Halvey said, death “wasn't scary or taboo” and families were intimately involved.

Why are there a zillion websites and references to being sex-positive and nothing for being death-positive?

~ Caitlin Doughty

Over the years that changed with the culture, he says. The alienation from death has been so pronounced for some, that many families opt out completely, he says. “A lot of families say, ‘Let's do nothing. We'll have a cremation and do nothing.’” He sees the movement as a good thing, “an attempt to get more involved in death and demystify the death and dying process.”

As part of that trend, Joe Schuka, the managing director at Libby Funeral Home in Beacon, says that over the last 20 years, he has seen a growth in families getting more involved in preparing the body of a loved one for a funeral, including washing and dressing.

“They want to take care of their loved one every step of the way,” Schuka says, noting that the internet offers tutorials on how to prepare the body.

In addition, more terminally ill people, such as Cheresson's mother, are choosing to die at home. About five years ago, homes surpassed hospitals as the most common place to die as more people opted for a “good death,” according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Center for Health Statistics cited in *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

The good death is a key theme of *The Watched Pot*, a play by Garrison playwright Keith Hershberger that was produced last



Patrick Halvey of Riverview Funeral Home in Beacon

Photo by J. Asher

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The Good Death (from Page 15)

month at the Philipstown Depot Theatre in Garrison. It tells the story of the final days of Sarah, who is attended to by her life partner, Mary, and other family members as she dies at home.

Hershberger says his play drew from his own experiences at the bedsides of five people as they died, including his father, Earl, in Michigan in 2010.

Hershberger and his siblings had gathered at their sleeping father's bedside when one of his brothers had the idea of toasting his life with his favorite scotch. Hershberger woke his father and said: "We're all here to celebrate your life with you and wish you well, and we have your favorite whiskey."

"His eyes shut and his mouth opened

like a baby bird," Hershberger recalls with a laugh. They soaked a sponge in scotch. "He sucked and sucked and wouldn't let go," Hershberger says. "I said, 'Dad there's more,' and his mouth sprung open. He 'drank' three or four of those sponges. We thanked him for being a part of our lives and we wished him well on his journey. He went to sleep and, in the morning, he died.

"It's a profoundly moving and meaningful thing to be able to share a person's last moments with them," Hershberger says. "It's a gift to be able to give them a peaceful ending."

Next week:

New ways of grieving



The good death is a key theme in *The Watched Pot*, which was performed last month at the Philipstown Depot Theatre.

Photo provided

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Haldane, Garrison School Districts Hold the Line

Both propose budgets that match state tax cap

By Joey Asher

The Haldane and Garrison school districts have each proposed budgets for 2024-25 that match their state-mandated tax caps. If the districts had chosen to override the caps, as happened in Garrison in 2022, at least 60 percent of voters would need to approve. The tax cap calculated for each district in the state varies each year based on multiple factors. At a meeting of the Haldane school board on Tuesday (March 5), Superintendent Philip Benante proposed \$29.2 million in spending, representing a 2.8 percent tax increase. The draft budget includes funding for:

- A second English as a New Language (ENL) teacher: \$100,000
- Converting a part-time psychologist to full-time, giving the district two full-time positions: \$77,000
- A third school counselor: \$100,000
- Increased funding for professional development around literacy for elementary school teachers: \$5,000
- Professional development conferences for teachers: \$15,000
- Updated phonics resources: \$20,000
- Special education funding to expand services: \$50,000

It also cuts funding for an elementary teaching position, saving \$100,000. Benante said the district could have 17 classes instead

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During the public comment, audience members held signs indicating their positions on the resolution. Photo by J. Simms

Beacon Passes Cease-fire Resolution

Vote caps five weeks of heated meetings

By Jeff Simms

Sixty-eight speakers made public comments over more than 3½ hours on Monday (March 4) before the Beacon City Council at 11 p.m. adopted a resolution calling for an “immediate, permanent and negotiated multilateral” cease-fire in Gaza. The measure passed 5-0, with Jeff Domanski and Mayor Lee Kyriacou abstaining. The vote drew loud applause from one side of the City Hall courtroom; the resolution will

now be sent to President Joe Biden and other federal and state elected officials who represent Beacon and the Highlands. The council approved a resolution that differs from a version posted on the city’s website on Feb. 29. After listening to the public comment, council members announced they would be voting on a draft that had been circulated (but not posted) that afternoon. Domanski said afterward that he abstained because the resolution fell short on “more universal and Beacon-specific guidance” it could have included. He also expressed concern that the council did not

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Part II

The Good Death

Is there a right way to grieve?
Rather than prescribed stages, residents of the Highlands have forged their own paths.

By Joey Asher

In the late 1960s, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross interviewed terminally ill patients and posited five stages of dying — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. After her 1969 bestseller, *On Death and Dying*, was published, the stages also became associated with grieving. Kübler-Ross later clarified that the stages could occur in any order or not at all and suggested a possible sixth stage, “meaning,” for those grieving. For Nancy Montgomery, one stage could have been “soccer practice.” When her husband, Jim Lovell, died on Dec. 1, 2013, in a Metro-North train derailment, she didn’t have time to grieve. “I was trying to survive,” says Montgomery, a Philipstown resident who is a member of the Putnam County Legislature. “I had three kids and two jobs. We were so busy.” Indeed, Montgomery’s experience, along with others in the Highlands, illustrates what many psychologists and counselors now believe: that grief doesn’t follow any model. “There are no absolutes,” says Karla Karpowicz, a psychotherapist who practices in Newburgh. For Montgomery, life without her

husband began with help from the community and her and her husband’s friends and colleagues. “I had three months of people bringing me food every day,” she recalls. “I was carried by this community. I was held.” But for years, she didn’t grieve. “I dove into the challenges of existing life to avoid it,” she says, including her jobs, running for the Philipstown Town Board and taking her teenagers to soccer games and play practice. Her son Jack acted in Haldane’s production of *Our Town* the week after his father died. Montgomery also began to advocate improved safety at Metro-North, such as automatic brakes that might have prevented the derailment that killed Lovell and three other people. While Montgomery attended therapy, it wasn’t grief therapy, she says. “I was working through the difficulties of my current life.” It wasn’t until her sons were on their own as young adults, she says, that she felt the impact of her husband’s death. “It became crawling-on-the-floor debilitating,” she says. “The photos around my house would stop me in my tracks.”

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Michele Gedney performed with her husband, Rick, who died in January 2023.

Photo provided

The Good Death

(Continued from Page 1)

By grieving, Montgomery says, she started to become comfortable. “There’s nothing to get over,” she says. “It’s part of me. I’m going to hold the grief until I die. What is grief but love persevering?”

The fact that Montgomery’s journey didn’t follow a tidy path isn’t surprising, says Saren Seeley, a professor at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan who studies the neuroscience of grief and trauma.

Seeley says that the scientific approach to grief has evolved since Sigmund Freud advised patients to detach and move on. “We don’t need to detach,” she says. “But that bond does need to change. We need to change our relationship with the person to accommodate for the fact that they’re no longer on this physical plane.”

Seeley says that psychologists have largely abandoned Kübler-Ross in favor of a dual-process model — “a dance back and forth between mourning the loss, looking backward and looking forward and dealing with life as it is now.”

Seeley says that grief work involves facing the reality that the person is gone. Failure to do so, she says, can lead to a disorder recognized by the psychiatry profession in 2022 as “prolonged grief disorder,” characterized by symptoms such as persistent depression. About 10 percent of people develop long-term symptoms, she says.

When grieving, therapists recommend a range of activities, from talk therapy, conversations with friends, hugging, embracing religious rituals if you have them, talking with a physician and/or



Nancy Montgomery at her Philipstown home with favorite photos of her husband, Jim Lovell, who died in 2013

Photo by J. Asher

pursuing a passion project.

Michele Gedney, the advertising director for *The Current*, whose observations following the death of her husband, Rick, in January 2023 inspired this series, says she tried to embrace the process of grieving.

“I immersed myself in it,” says Gedney, who wrote and performed music with her husband as Open Book. Two weeks after Rick died, Michele spoke at his memorial service at The Chapel Restoration in Cold Spring. Afterward, “I felt more resolved to go forward,” she says.

Gedney embraced her grief in other ways. She saw a therapist and listened to podcasts on the topic, including *Grief is a Sneaky Bitch* with Lisa Keefauver and *All There Is* with Anderson Cooper.

She also finished production on an album, *Leaning In*, that she and her husband had

recorded before he went into the hospital. At first, listening to the recordings was painful, she says. “I was sobbing the whole time. But eventually, I came through the emotional part to where I could listen to the music critically.”

Now she views the recordings as ongoing expressions of their love. “The evidence of his love for me is tangible because I can listen to it at any time,” she says. And while the pain returns often, she says, it doesn’t last.

Bill Viletto’s grief journey was different still. The Philipstown resident dealt with the pain of the loss in 1997 of his 27-year-old son, William Viletto Jr., in a car accident on Route 9D in Beacon by visiting the gravesite every day and talking to him. “He never answered, of course,” says Viletto. “But I felt like I didn’t leave him alone.”

About 60 percent of people surveyed

What is the Best Way to Grieve?

“There isn’t anything that you should never do,” says Karla Karpowicz, a grief therapist based in Newburgh. “Everyone is different in how they process grief.”

It’s not an emotion to avoid, says Jane Wilson Cathcart, a Cold Spring therapist who specializes in grief and bereavement. “You don’t get over it. You don’t get through it. You move forward with it.”

Therapists agree there is no single way to grieve. But there are some best practices:

- Seek community and therapy.
- If you have a spiritual or religious practice, use it. Rituals help.
- Talk to your primary-care physician. Physical symptoms are often symptoms of grief.
- Keep a grief journal.
- Seek out people who can listen and help you emotionally.
- Attend grief groups.
- Take care of life’s ongoing business.
- Do a passion project to remember and honor your loved one.
- Be hugged and held.
- Distance yourself from people who are impatient with you for not “being over it.”
- Anticipate that anniversaries will be hard.
- Continue personal rituals if they make you feel closer to your loved one.
- Take care of your body with activities like yoga, going to the gym and taking walks.
- Take the bereavement time from work that you’re entitled to.
- Beloved pets deserve to be grieved.

reported talking to deceased loved ones, says Angie LeRoy, a professor at Baylor University who studies the psychology and neuroscience of grief. She says it “can be incredibly healing.”

At Mount Sinai, Saren Seeley adds that conversing “can help facilitate a continuing bond. It can give you space to say things you didn’t get to say.”

That, in part, she says, explains why people often turn to psychics who claim they can make contact with the dead. In Poughkeepsie, Shaine Amour says many of her clients hope to “nurture their forever connection” with loved ones.

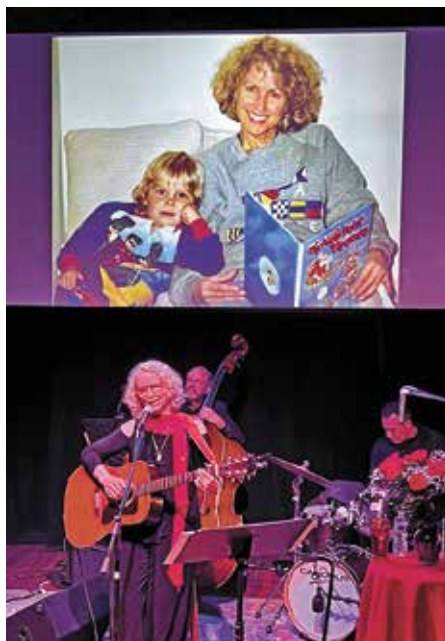
A Philipstown resident, who did not want to be named, says he took comfort from a psychic following the death of his son at age 41 from complications of addiction. The psychic quoted his late son as saying: “Make sure you tell dad that he was doing everything for me before I passed away. Make sure he knows I love him.”

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“There’s nothing to get over. It’s part of me. I’m going to hold the grief until I die.” ~Nancy Montgomery

"We expand. You get to the point where you can hold two different emotions at the same time: total grief and total joy."

~ Cat Guthrie



As Cat Guthrie performed her one-woman show about grief, *Nine Lives*, a photo of her and her son, Keaton, was projected behind her.

Photo provided



Bill Viletto lost his son, William Viletto Jr., in 1997.

Photo by J. Asher

(Continued from Page 8)

By contrast, Cat Guthrie, who lives in Garrison, visited several psychics after her son, Keaton, 25, died in a surfing accident in 2018 but found little value in the sessions.

She had experienced grief as a young woman when two of her four older sisters died of diseases of the nervous system and was determined to process Keaton's loss differently. When her sisters died, "I couldn't handle it," she recalls. "I shut my heart down."

After losing her son, "I made grief my job," Guthrie says. She attended retreats, read books on the topic and learned to teach "grief yoga," which is "about using yoga to work grief out of your body."

Like many parents, she honored her son, who loved the outdoors, by creating a nonprofit to improve the lives of others. Keaton's Kids funds adventures such as snowboard trips for children from low-income families.

A singer-songwriter, Guthrie also wrote and performs a one-woman show, *Nine Lives*, with songs addressing her grief.

She notes that grief never goes away. But "we grow around it," she says. "We expand. You get to the point where you can hold two different emotions at the same time: total grief and total joy."

See highlandscurrent.org for Part I of this series.

Cold Spring to Get Traffic Help

Planning organization will share expertise

By Michael Turton

Over the next few months, Cold Spring will receive professional help in dealing with its pressing transportation, traffic and pedestrian safety issues, at a cost even a municipality with a tight budget can afford: It will be free.

The details were shared at the Feb. 21 meeting of the Village Board. The Community Planning Workshop Program is provided in counties that are members of the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council (NYMTC), in conjunction with the Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University.

Miriam Salerno, the senior research manager at Voorhees who has been meeting with Mayor Kathleen Foley for several months, said the program will help the village find "ways to reduce traffic and allow more free movement by pedestrians," taking into account the influx of visitors during peak seasons.

Salerno said the program will recommend improvements in four parts of the village that pose traffic and pedestrian safety problems: (1) The intersection of Routes 9D and 301; (2) Main Street at the Visitor Center; (3) Lunn Terrace at Market Street; and (4) Fair Street.

The initiative will also examine the trolley service operated by Putnam County, which for years has underperformed in terms of ridership.

The process, which Salerno expects to be completed by late summer, will include four components: (1) Development of a "story map," a website illustrating the program and related data; (2) a survey of residents and businesses; (3) facilitated workshops for residents; and (4) a summary report with detailed recommendations.

David Drita, program manager for the NYMTC, said the report will be similar to preliminary engineering being done for projects recommended in the final report. It won't provide design or construction details.

Foley said, "This is a huge capacity expansion for the village," which does not have its own planning staff. She said the report "will help Cold Spring be a competitor for state and federal infrastructure money that we've been unable to unlock in the past."

At the meeting, Trustee Aaron Freimark noted that the Village Board is planning a survey of residents about the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail and asked about coordination with the NYMTC program.

The HHFT is also surveying residents in the lower village and on Fair Street, areas that could be affected by the trail's potential routes.

Foley said she hopes the NYMTC survey can go out by late April.

Trustee Tweeps Phillips Woods observed that the village has struggled to address the issues that will be examined. "These are questions we have to ask and have answers to," she said, regardless of whether the process coordinates with HHFT initiatives.

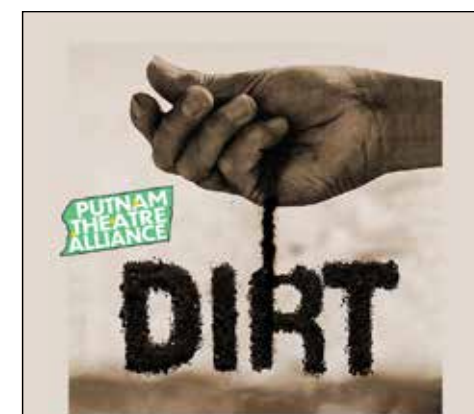
In an email, the mayor said Cold Spring is under tremendous pressure from tourism and the proposed Fjord Trail. "We need all the tools we can fit into our kit to make solid decisions," she said. "We don't have an option to sit back, let decisions be made around us and hope they serve our best interests. We have to be proactive in our planning."

NYMTC, established in 1982, is the designated Metropolitan Planning Organization for New York City, Long Island and Rockland, Westchester and Putnam counties. Federal law requires that all metropolitan areas with populations greater than 50,000 have an MPO to address regional transportation planning.

Foley said the village was unaware of the program until last summer, when John Tully, then the county planning commissioner, told her about it at a meeting regarding the Cold Spring Trolley, a session also attended by county Transportation Director Vincent Tamagna.

She said she decided to pursue having Cold Spring participate when she learned that the Village of Mahopac had benefited from it. It requires neither a formal agreement with NYMTC nor a resolution by the Village Board.

Visit highlandscurrent.org for news updates and latest information.



If you are unable to see DIRT this weekend at The Philipstown Depot Theatre, you can try for tickets at:



— March 15, 16 & 17 —

Arts on the Lake on Lake Carmel
(artsonthelake.org)



— March 23 & March 24 —
Tompkins Corners Cultural Center
in Putnam Valley
(tompkinscorners.org)

One new play, one big county.

Where to Find Help

Support Groups

- Libby Funeral Home in Beacon hosts a support group at 6 p.m. on the second Tuesday of the month. Call 845-831-0179 or register at libbyfuneralhome.com/grief-support/grief-resources.
- Hudson Valley Hospice offers support services. Call 845-240-7579 or email bereavementcenter@hvhospice.org.
- Heartlight Center (heartlightcenter.org), based in Colorado, offers online support groups and workshops.
- The Dougy Center (dougy.org) has resources for children and teens.

Podcasts

- Griefcast* (cariadlloyd.com/griefcast)
- All There Is with Anderson Cooper* (bit.ly/all-there-is-AC)
- Terrible, Thanks for Asking* (ttfa.org)
- Good Mourning* (goodmourning.com.au)
- Grief is a Sneaky Bitch* (lisakeefauver.com)

Books

- It's Okay to Laugh (Crying is Cool Too)*, by Nora McInerney
- When Breath Becomes Air*, by Paul Kalanithi
- The Invisible String*, by Patrice Karst