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EDITOR'S PICK

FEATURED

SPECIAL REPORT

TOP STORY

2019: A Year in Review

By Cecil Whig Staff editor@cecilwhig.com

Dec 31, 2019



Fans and tailgaters enjoy the scenery and horses during the Cross Country Test at the Fair Hill International 3-Day Event at Fair Hill Natural Resources Area in Fair Hill, Maryland. This is the final year of a 31-year run of the event at this location. In 2020, the event moves to a new facility in the Fair Hill area and will eventually be upgraded to one of two CCI 5-star events in the United States.

PHOTO BY Scott Serio/Eclipse Sportswire/CSM

CECIL COUNTY — As we head into 2020, we're closing out the Cecil Whig's year of reporting and looking ahead to what's next for our county.

Next year, we're looking forward to more development in the county — we'll have stories on Bainbridge, Southfields and Great Wolf Lodge, among other things. We're sure to have a lively election season, as well. Fair Hill International will host its first year as a 5-star event next year. In education, we will have further updates about state funding, and Immaculate Conception is likely closing its doors at the end of the 2019/2020 school year. All of this and much, much more awaits us in 2020.

We will continue our comprehensive beat coverage of local and county policy, school board and education initiatives, agriculture, transportation, business, law and crime. Join us now as we look back at the top stories of 2019.

Our editorial staff is grateful to all our paginators, designers, advertising staff, carriers and everyone else who makes the Cecil Whig the wonderful newspaper and piece of history that it is. And, most of all, we're grateful to our loyal readers and the people of Cecil County.

Cheers to another year of local news, community journalism and award-winning work. The pleasure is ours entirely.

Development: Bainbridge begins cleanup

After almost 20 years, the slumbering Bainbridge property in Port Deposit began to stir this month as contractors began the long-awaited environmental site work, bringing the property one step closer to redevelopment.

The 1,200-acre Cecil County property is slated for commercial and industrial development, but significant asbestos abatement and other preparation work must take place first. The first phase started in December with a 400-acre cleanup.

After the environmental cleanup has finished, developers Manekin-Turner-Paterakis and Michael (MTPM) and MRP Industrial will break ground in spring 2020 for a modern distribution center.

"It's coming together after 20 years, for a real prospect — shovels in the ground and earth will be moved this spring," Bainbridge Development Corporation Executive Director Steve Cassard said during the county's Economic Development Commission earlier this month.

Bainbridge has been dormant since the U.S. Navy decommissioned the 1,200-acre naval training site and conveyed it to Port Deposit in 2000.

Beyond this first stage, Cassard said the Navy is considering expanding the cleanup agreement to the rest of Bainbridge.

In the meantime, the county and Port Deposit are working to ensure Bainbridge's success. Port Deposit is reportedly in the process of revising its comprehensive plan, which will ultimately outline the new vision for the site.

The county is moving forward with building a sewer treatment plant to serve the site. The plan will be in operation in spring 2021.

Infrastructure continues to be the biggest question the BDC, the county and town are left to answer. But there may be hope coming from Gov. Larry Hogan's office, as the BDC requested \$4 million in a special appropriation the Fiscal Year 2021 budget.

"This project is more important than people even realize," County Executive Alan McCarthy said.

Development is targeted to start in spring 2020.

"The people sitting around this table are in this for one reason and one reason only: to get out of business. We want that property developed and we want Port Deposit to take it over and have full reign," BDC Chair Carl Roberts said. "When you have good people to work with and take their positions seriously, it can't get much better than that."

Development: Southfields draws supporters and detractors

Southfields is a mixed-use development in southern Elkton that includes light industrial, single-family homes, apartments, retail and recreation. The entire project is 650 acres in size and runs south of White Hall Road to Frenchtown Road, between the Elk River and Maloney Road. The entire property is within Elkton's borders.

The project is controversial for several neighbors of the area, because one-third of its land is slated for an unknown "logistics park" or light-industrial use.

Several official and unofficial meetings have occurred throughout the year for residents with concerns to sound off, including one in October where Elkton Mayor Rob Alt suspended the meeting order and allowed nearly an hour of public comment before a final vote. A meeting in August featured three hours of public criticism of the project and developer.

A petition against the development of the land have reached more than 500 signatures, and both pro- and anti-Southfields factions have reached a fever pitch.

Southfields promises to transform the region with jobs in the light industrial and retail use, but some residents who live near it are concerned about the noise, traffic and the water runoff that could come with the project. Some people supported portions of the part, including local leaders in youth recreation that backed the sports park, while others welcome the boost to the local tax base.

But most who stand against it — mostly neighbors who would live on Southfield's perimeter — criticize the impact the industrial component would have on their quality of life.

"The industrial park frankly breaks my heart, and I seriously consider leaving the county," said Patricia Wells, who would live near the industrial component, during a public hearing this fall. "I'd love to see some growth ... but I don't think it's appropriate for a rural area."

Alt and the town's commissioners responded to criticism and accusations that they would support the Southfields developers over town residents, pointing out that the PUD language had been reviewed and crafted by the Elkton Planning Department and its legal counsel to ensure the board "does the right thing."

In November, the neighbors of the proposed Southfields planned-use development took their concerns directly to the developer, Ray Jackson, the principal owner of Stonewall Capital in a meeting facilitated by Councilman Bill Coutz (District 2) after he and Council Vice President Jackie Gregory (District 5) met with a group of residents to hear their concerns.

"In my mind, it's progress," Jackson told the Whig. "It was very respectful, and at the least, I felt like some may be more receptive to it because I've been transparent and open to hearing their concerns."

John Conolly, a resident who frequently voiced his concerns on Southfields, walked away from the November meeting feeling like the door is now open for more communication.

"The exchange was very positive, and we were able to get our concerns out there and make Mr. Jackson aware of them," Conolly said. "The meeting has helped set the stage for more productive conversations to come."

During the meeting, Jackson introduced a detailed concept plan, which answered many of the residents' concerns. It shows buffers around the light-industrial complex and a single point of access via U.S. Route 40. The size for this parcel has also shrunk down from 4.2 million square feet to 3 million square feet.

Another highlight was the boulevard — two lanes of egress and two lanes of ingress — that would lead to the residential and retail parcels west of Route 213. The traffic study has been completed, with requests for traffic signals, and filed with the State Highway Administration for review.

Stormwater management will be addressed through improved options with filtrations.

But one question Jackson couldn't answer is the type of jobs that would be created by the industrial complex.

"There's no specific tenant there yet, so there is no answer," he said.

Election Changes: Perryville, Rising Sun and Port Deposit

Proposed changes to the election cycle and length of term in office for the mayor and commissioners will be the topic of public hearings in Perryville. Hearings will be next week.

Charter Amendment Resolution 2020-01 will change the terms in office from two years to three and allows for the smooth transition to that cycle.

Charter Amendment Resolution 2020-02 allows candidates who have no challenger to be declared the winner, canceling any scheduled election.

At a special meeting held last week, the mayor and commissioners approved a charter amendment to eliminate write-in voting in Perryville. The vote was 4-1 with Commissioner Robert Taylor abstaining. It was Taylor who based his campaign for town office on improving turnout for town elections.

Like other small towns, Perryville has witnessed low voter turnout and low participation by office seekers. In May, Commissioners Michelle Linkey and Everett "Pete" Reich faced no challenge in their bid to be re-elected. There are 2,787 registered voters in Perryville but only 102 took part in the recent uncontested election. Mayor Robert Ashby said that was \$3,000 that could have been spent elsewhere.

Rising Sun is also debating whether to eliminate no-contest elections after less than two dozen voters took part in the October election that returned Pauline Braun and Augie Pierson to their commissioner seats.

Dave Warnick, a Rising Sun commissioner, suggested that the town return to using its wooden ballot box and paper ballots for uncontested races, which would save the cost of renting electronic machines but still allow for voter participation.

Port Deposit's mayor and town council already acted on its charter change and canceled the May 2019 election when there was no challenge to the incumbents on the ballot. Only Mayor Wayne Tome and Councilman Kevin Brown were on the ballot and were declared winners.

Rising Sun has heard some suggestions from a resident — and former town commissioner — who is trying to keep the town from canceling uncontested elections.

Stephen Naughton came before the board at a town meeting to plead the case, saying even when there is no competition he wants his right to vote preserved.

“So rather than be negative, I wanted to come back with a positive idea and maybe increase voter turnout,” Naughton said.

Less than 2% of voters participated in the Oct. 21 election that returned Pauline Braun and Augie Pierson to their seats.

Naughton told the board his appearance at the town meeting the following day caught the attention of Del. Kevin Hornberger who referred him to Jim Peck with the Maryland Municipal League. It was in talking with Peck that Naughton developed several options for Rising Sun to consider.

“Rockville has gone to a system where they vote by mail,” Naughton said. According to Naughton, Rockville witnessed a surge with an additional 3,000 voters participating.

“We could see more people interested in running for office. Wouldn't that be a neat thing?” Naughton said.

He also suggested that Rising Sun could hold its town election in concert with state or federal elections on the same ballot as a gubernatorial or congressional race.

Commissioner Dave Warnick agreed that people have the right to be heard at the ballot box.

“But there’s also the balance of that expense,” Warnick said.

Education: School board reelects Malesh pres., elects Hawley as veep

William Malesh was reelected board president and Diana Hawley was elected vice president during the Cecil County Public Schools Board of Education’s annual organizational meeting in December.

Malesh, who represents District 4 covering the Perryville and Port Deposit areas, was unanimously elected president, having served in the role since 2018. Hawley, who represents District 5 covering the North East area, was also unanimously elected vice president after being nominated by former vice president Jim Fazzino, who has served in that role since 2017.

Fazzino, who represents District 2 covering the northern Elkton area, will complete his current term on the school board at the end of 2020, at which point he has decided not to run for reelection.

As he enters his second year as board president, Malesh said he is prepared to continue learning and working hard alongside his fellow school officials.

“The longer I stay, the more I learn and the more complexities and the more positive things are occurring,” he said. “We have an awful lot of people here working really hard to produce a fine school system for everybody. I’m very impressed with my board and I’m very impressed with the community and the business community.”

Malesh said he hopes to demonstrate balance and keep the doors of communication open with the public.

“I want to keep all the tires level and everybody communicating so they really understand where we are and what’s happening and develop a permanent trust,” he said. “There’s often distrust about the government, and people really need to get involved and really need to see that everybody’s here just working hard and not shaving money off of anything. [We are] just spending every penny we can for the good of the kids.”

Hawley said she was pleased to have the opportunity to start a new chapter on the school board as vice president.

“I’m very honored to represent the board in this capacity,” she said. “I look forward to another year.”

In addition to Malesh, Hawley and Fazzino, the school board is comprised of William Manlove, who represents District 1, covering the lower Elkton area and the portion of the county below the C&D Canal; Christie Stephens, who represents District 3, covering the Rising Sun area; and student board member Kelsey Meis, who is a non-voting member but provides a student voice on the board.

The District 1 and District 2 seats will be up for election in 2020. With Fazzino’s decision not to run for reelection and Manlove coming to the end of his second and final term, the school board will see the addition of two new members at the end of 2020.

Law: Bessicks steps down, Dellmyer steps in as State’s Attorney

Cecil County State’s Attorney Amanda Bessicks stepped down from her chief prosecutor position in February, less than six months after a special administrative order by the Circuit Court of Cecil County’s judicial bench appointed her to the role early.

“I am deeply saddened to notify you that effective March 15, 2019, I will be resigning my position as the State’s Attorney for Cecil County due to health reasons. This was not an easy decision, but I have arrived at this conclusion after much thought, and consultation with my family,” Bessicks explained in her letter of resignation.

Bessicks’ election was historic in the county, as she was the first woman to be elected to the position and is believed to be the youngest elected chief prosecutor in county history.

Then-Deputy State's Attorney James Dellmyer assumed the leadership role in March on an interim basis. He was confirmed as State's Attorney in December.

"While we wish Ms. Bessicks a full and speedy recovery, the reality is that this important position must be expeditiously filled with the most competent attorney available," County Executive Alan McCarthy wrote at the time of Bessicks' resignation.

Bessicks — a relative newcomer to the courtroom — defeated her more experienced opponents, including then-Deputy State's Attorney Karl H. Fockler and then-Assistant State's Attorney Kevin B. Urick, in the state's attorney race in the Republican primary in June.

Bessicks, 34, of Elkton, garnered 2,805 votes (50.7%), while Fockler, who has since resigned from the State's Attorney's Office, received the second highest total with 1,748 (31.6%) and Urick, who has since retired from the State's Attorney's Office, received 977 votes (17.7%).

No Democrat had filed as a candidate, so, at that point, Bessicks was the presumed winner of the race in November's general election.

Newly-elected state's attorneys typically take their oath of office on the first Monday in January, some six weeks after the general election.

Bessicks' swearing-in ceremony, however, was expedited. Propelled by a rare administrative order, the four Cecil County Circuit Court judges appointed Bessicks to the state's attorney position on Aug. 9.

As of late December, James A. Dellmyer is now Cecil County State's Attorney James A. Dellmyer, after the four sitting Cecil County Circuit Court judges decided to remove the word "interim" from his title.

Cecil County Circuit Court Administrative Judge Keith A. Baynes and the three associate circuit court judges — William W. Davis Jr., Jane Cairns Murray and Brenda A. Sexton — convened earlier this month and agreed to change Dellmyer's title by removing "interim" and make him this county's state's attorney.

The change in title does not give Dellmyer more powers, nor does it change his duties and responsibilities. It does, however, signal permanence at the state's attorney position held by Dellmyer.

“James is doing a good job. He has all the qualities we want in a state’s attorney,” Baynes told the Cecil Whig.

Should Dellmyer, a Republican, want to retain his Cecil County State’s Attorney position, he would have to run in the 2022 election as the incumbent.

“Then it would be up to the citizens of Cecil County,” Baynes noted.

Dellmyer, 36, of Chesapeake City, took his oath of office Friday, Dec. 20, during a brief ceremony in the Cecil County Circuit Courthouse.

His deputy state’s attorney, or second-in-command, Patricia A. Fitzgerald, also took her oath of office, as did Dellmyer’s staff of 13 assistant state’s attorneys — all of which is required by law whenever there is a leadership change.

Dellmyer will continue to handle a criminal caseload and prosecute defendants in the courtroom as this county’s state’s attorney. Dellmyer also will continue to handle the position’s administrative duties.

Baynes agreed that the judges’ decision to make Dellmyer this county’s state’s attorney, after he had served nine months with the interim status, can be viewed as a “vote of confidence” for him.

“He is the state’s attorney from here on out,” Baynes remarked.

On Dec. 20, after his swearing-in ceremony, Dellmyer commented, “I am humbled and honored by the decision of the Judges of the Circuit Court. The confidence they have shown in me with this appointment means very much to me and my team. I look forward to furthering the progress we have made protecting the safety of the citizens of Cecil County, which is our most important mission.”

Under his leadership, Dellmyer has pushed to make the SAO “more responsive and better able to serve” Cecil County residents, according to Steven Barlow, an agency public information officer.

“The Office has undergone significant changes and improvements, including transitioning all prosecutors from part-time to full-time employment. This has resulted in increased productivity, and has helped to accomplish a cost-effective and fiscally conservative budget,” Barlow said.

Crime: Gruesome murder-suicide rocks the county

A father shot his 7-year-old son dead inside their Rising Sun-area home in September and then turned the weapon on himself, taking his own life. The crime rocked the county and occurred the weekend before the start of the school year.

Officials identified the boy as Mason Holcombe, who was pronounced dead at the shooting scene in the 1100 block of Ridge Road, north of Rising Sun.

Mason attended Bethany Christian School in Oxford, Pa. The boy previously had been enrolled with Cecil County Public Schools.

Officials identified the father as 33-year-old Joshua Phillip Holcombe, who was flown by a Maryland State Police helicopter crew to University of Maryland's Shock Trauma Unit in Baltimore, where he was pronounced dead shortly after arriving there.

Holcombe was married at the time of the fatal double-shooting. Lt. Michael Holmes, a Cecil County Sheriff's Office spokesman told the Cecil Whig that two other adults and another young child also were inside the residence at the time of the incident. He said they were relatives, but declined to release their names.

"We are investigating this as a murder-suicide. There were witnesses, and we are interviewing them to determine exactly what happened. There was some sort of disturbance at the residence prior to the shooting, but the child (Mason) was not involved in that disturbance. We are still trying to piece things together," Holmes said, adding, "A handgun was located and seized from inside the residence. Investigators believe the handgun was used during the incident."

CCSO deputies, Maryland State Police troopers and Rising Sun Police Department officers responded to the 911 dispatch, police said. They found Mason, who had suffered multiple gunshot wounds, in one part of the house and they found his gravely-wounded father at another location in the residence, police added.

"The boy was shot multiple times. This was an intentional shooting," Holmes said, adding that the father shot himself one time shortly after opening fire on his son. "There was not a long gap between the two (shootings). We are looking into the mental health aspect as well. Investigators are actively researching his (Holcombe's) mental health background."

A woman who lives on Ridge Road, several houses away from the double-shooting scene, told the Cecil Whig that she noticed a distraught woman go by her home that afternoon.

“I saw a woman running down the road, toward the house (where the double-shooting occurred). She was crying and screaming, ‘It was my grandson. It was my grandson,’” said the woman, who asked to remain anonymous.

On Facebook, Joshua’s brother, Justin Holcombe, a well-known tattoo artist in the county, wrote that his family is struggling to understand why the violence occurred.

“This is the last thing I want to be doing right now. But as I wake up wishing it was all a bad dream I’m confronted with the news and social media about the unfathomable tragedy that my family is trying to deal with right now. My little brother adored his children and his family. He was the best father I’ve ever seen. None of this makes any sense,” he wrote, pleading with the community to not spread rumors about the incident. “We are all completely baffled and our centers are fractured at their cores. I honestly don’t know what is even real anymore. I need time. My family needs time. Please allow the dust to settle and for us to get the closest thing to the truth that we can get before stories are told and theories are developed. We simply can’t understand why. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Tragedy: Three children, uncle killed in crash

A Bay View-area family is forever changed after a car crash near North East in May claimed the lives of three young children and their uncle, and left their oldest sibling and grandmother with life-threatening injuries.

About 9:36 p.m. Thursday, May 20, Cecil County Sheriff’s Office deputies were dispatched to a reported collision with an ejected individual in the 600 block of Mechanics Valley Road near North East, according to CCSO Chief Deputy Gerald Widdoes. A deputy reportedly arrived within one minute and another deputy arrived within two minutes of the dispatch — and upon arrival found a horrific scene.

A 2005 Saturn Vue sport utility vehicle carrying six members of the Shackelford and Jackson family struck a 1999 Chevrolet pickup truck, and two of the children were unresponsive on arrival, police reported. The patrol deputies immediately began CPR on the two children, Widdoes reported.

A 4-year-old boy was declared deceased at the scene, while a 10-year-old girl was taken to Union Hospital, and a 9-year-old boy was taken to Union Hospital and then flown to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, according to police. Both subsequently succumbed to their injuries, Widdoes reported.

A family representative identified those children as Nolan Jackson, 4; Talen Jackson, 9; and Ciersten Jackson, 10. Also declared deceased at the scene was the Saturn's front seat passenger, Anthony "Tony" Shackelford, 34, who was the uncle of the children in the car, police reported.

Meanwhile, two more people were in critical condition after the crash: a 13-year-old boy — identified by family as the eldest sibling, David Jackson Jr. — was flown to Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Delaware; and the driver of the Saturn, Mary E. Shackelford, 53, was also flown to University of Maryland Shock Trauma, Widdoes reported.

The driver of the pickup truck, James T. Tobin, 24, of Elkton, was taken by ambulance to Christiana Hospital in Delaware with what is believed to be non-life-threatening injuries, police reported.

According to the preliminary investigation, Mary Shackelford was traveling south on Mechanics Valley Road when she lost control for an unknown reason and her vehicle subsequently spun sideways where it was struck by Tobin's northbound pickup truck, police reported. The crash scene was less than 3 miles from the Stoney Chase Drive home of Mary and Tony Shackelford off Bouchelle Road.

Aiding in the response were Cecil County Department of Emergency Services paramedics; North East, Singerly and Charlestown fire companies; and three helicopters from the Maryland State Police and Delaware State Police. Mechanics Valley Road was closed with the assistance of the Cecil County Roads Department and Fire Police.

"Though words can do little, we extend our thoughts and prayers to their families and friends during this very tragic time," Cecil County Executive Alan McCarthy said. "We can only pray that the individuals who survived will make a full recovery."

McCarthy also noted the service of the law enforcement and emergency officials who assisted with the situation.

“My thoughts are also with our first responders, officers, dispatchers and emergency medical personnel as I can only imagine how difficult this tragedy was for them as well,” he said. “Their dedication to serving the citizens of Cecil County is often met with severely tragic situations. Please hold them, as well as families, friends and our entire community close during this time of sorrow. May peace and comfort find each of us as we mourn.”

Cecil County Public Schools Superintendent Jeff Lawson also joined community members in grieving the CCPS students who lost their lives in the incident, and expressing his condolences to their loved ones.

“Our hearts are heavy today as we mourn the tragic loss of life that occurred as a result of yesterday evening’s accident,” he said. “Not only were they fellow members of our Cecil County community, but they were also students in the CCPS family. The thoughts and prayers of the entire school system are with the family, friends, and loved ones of those involved.”

Lawson pledged CCPS will provide any support it can to those affected by the incident.

“We share in their grief and will continue to provide whatever support we can,” he said. “I would like to thank the first responders and emergency personnel who were present to assist following the accident; the work of these individuals provides a critical service in the most tragic of circumstances and we are forever grateful for their unwavering willingness to do so.”

Business: Mary Jo Jablonski dies; Chamber leaders abruptly resign

The Elkton Chamber & Alliance saw major shifts in 2019, as its executive director Mary Jo Jablonski died in February and her two longtime colleagues in the chamber, Roger Owens and Larry Crouse, resigned in August.

Jablonski served as the Elkton Chamber & Alliance executive director for 19 years and on the town’s board of commissioners for 13 years. She also helped pave the way for arts in town as she spearheaded the effort within the state to create an Arts and Entertainment District in Elkton.

In her work, Jablonski served as the face of Elkton’s business community. She worked to apply state grant dollars to reimagine the town, and she welcomed new businesses in with an infectious smile.

Jablonski was diagnosed with liver disease and battled liver cancer, but continued her public duties with no indication of her battle. She attended town meetings and ribbon cuttings up to January. She left behind her husband, Walter, two daughters, Danielle and Jessica, and two grandsons.

She was honored in a ceremony at Immaculate Conception Church, that brought town, county and state dignitaries together. She was laid to rest at Immaculate Conception Church.

After her passing, Jablonski's right-hand woman, Jessica Price, was named interim executive director. Later on, the Elkton Chamber & Alliance Board voted to name Price to that position permanently.

But after some questions on whether Price's appointment went through the proper channels, both Elkton Chamber & Alliance Board Chairman Larry Crouse and vice chair Roger Owens, resigned this summer. Both men have contributed a combined 40 years worth of work with the Elkton Chamber & Alliance, including the town's mainstay events and ribbon cuttings for new businesses.

Meeting minutes show that Crouse led an unscheduled vote to confirm Price at the July board meeting, with no visible efforts to conduct a search for a new executive director. The Elkton Alliance bylaws have no clear direction on what to do in the event of a vacancy in the executive director position.

Despite this timing, both Crouse and Owens said that it was now time for them to step back and focus on personal matters — and for the Elkton Chamber & Alliance to move forward under new leadership and fresh ideas.

In September, the board voted Brad Carrillo as chairman, Danielle Carroll as vice chairwoman, Margie Blystone as treasurer and Cindy Fetterolf as secretary. The board also voted to continue forward with Price as executive director.

The **Cecil County Chamber of Commerce** also saw executive changes, as Bonnie Grady left her post as president and CEO of the Cecil County Chamber of Commerce in September. She came to the chamber in May 2013.

Housing: Elkton Housing Authority director allegedly embezzles \$50k

In October, the Cecil Whig obtained documents between Housing and Urban Development officials and the Elkton Housing Authority in Cecil County alleging that EHA executive director Cynthia Osborne had embezzled approximately \$50,000 in federal funds.

A July 2 letter from Charles Hicks, chair of the Board of Elkton Housing Authority, to HUD officials in both Baltimore and Washington states that “on or about June 28, 2019, we uncovered financial improprieties by the Authority’s Executive Director, Cynthia Osborne.”

The letter further states that the board is “aware” that Osborne has allegedly “embezzled approximately \$50,000 in federal funds,” and that Osborne “admitted to the embezzlement as a lone actor.”

Osborne was escorted out of the East Main Street building with instructions not to return to the property until Board Chair Hicks notified her to do so, according to documents obtained by the Whig.