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Magazine

July 2019

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# East Village Magazine

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## Commentary

# Of budgets and ballots: A funny thing happened on the way to the election

*By Paul Rozycki*

For most cities, villages, and townships, an election is a pretty routine thing. Candidates file, their names go on the ballot, they campaign, voters go to the polls, and the next set of officeholders are chosen to begin their terms.

Not in Flint.

It was only four years ago that Flint had to petition the state to allow candidates on the ballot, after most of the potential candidates for mayor missed the filing deadline. They would have been left off the ballot, leaving the city with the prospect of a wide-open, write-in campaign. Giggles the Pig's candidacy gathered much media attention, as the more serious candidates scrambled to put together campaigns in 2015.

This year's mayoral campaign may not have Giggles in the race (so far), but Flint seems to be continuing its habit of running elections in its own unique and unpredictable way. The primary is scheduled for Aug. 6, and there are four candidates who have filed to run: Greg Eason, state Rep. Sheldon Neeley, Don Pfeiffer, and incumbent Mayor Karen Weaver. The top two candidates will run off in November to win the three-year term for Flint's mayor.

There are several odd things about this election.

First, the mayoral election is the first one under the new charter, and for that reason, we will elect a mayor for a three-year term — to serve until 2022. After that, the mayor and the council will be elected in at the same time and in the same year as the governor — every four years. Having only the mayor's race on the ballot, for an unusual term, may confuse and discourage some voters.

Second, while there have been four candidates who filed and were initially certified for the ballot, for a while it looked like some, or possibly all, of those candidates could have been bounced off the ballot, leaving the voters with a wide-open, write-in campaign for mayor. Each of the candi-

dates have faced charges that they filled out their filing petitions incorrectly, and lawsuits were filed to keep them off the ballot.

The Flint City Clerk Inez Brown certified the four candidates, but then the Genesee County Election Commission decided that Greg Eason's errors were serious enough to keep him from being listed on the ballot. In the end, Circuit Court Judge Joseph Farah ruled that all four candidates should be allowed to run, in spite of a number of errors and mistakes in their affidavits. While Judge Farah did rule that the voters should have the final choice of candidates, in spite of the flawed documents, the lawsuits have delayed campaigning, and may further confuse and discourage voters.

Third, while the mayoral race is (at this time) the only contest on the ballot, there have been several attempts to recall as many as four members of the city council — Kate Fields, Santino Guerra, Allan Griggs, and Monica Galloway. At the moment, Monica Galloway (7th Ward) Allan Griggs (8th Ward), Santino Guerra (3rd Ward), and possibly Kate Fields (4th Ward), are facing recalls. Most of the recalls were initiated by Councilman Eric Mays, in an attempt to create a stronger pro-Weaver council. There may be more efforts to recall, as well as legal challenges to those attempts. If enough signatures are gathered, the recalls could appear on the November ballot.

Fourth, the city council in a recent meeting, approved the city budget for the next year. That's all well and good, but as they approved the \$55.6 million budget, they added \$1.7 million in funds to retain 33 firefighters who would be laid off when a federal grant ran out. The overall budget would have added 34 new positions and cut 57. The problem is that the city didn't have the resources to cover the new money, and several on the council feared that it could lead to serious finan-

*(Continued on Page 5.)*



Photo of the Month: The Great Lakes National Cemetery

## *Brush up on your memories: StoryCorps coming back to Flint*

*By Jan Worth-Nelson*

“Listen. Honor. Share.”

Those are the basic tenets of grassroots storytelling built into StoryCorps, the nationally known project coming back to Flint for a month beginning Aug. 6.

“Listening is an act of love and generosity,” the StoryCorps brochure continues — and organizers from Michigan Radio and the Flint Institute of Arts, co-hosts of the visit, hope there will be lots of all that in the StoryCorps mobile booth.

The renowned Airstream trailer, a fully tricked-out recording studio, will be parked at the FIA through Sept. 6, ready to receive Flint community members and invite their stories.

### **Reservations required starting July 23**

The non-profit StoryCorps team, devoted to celebrating the stories of everyday Americans, will begin recruiting guests who’d like to be part of the Flint project July 23. Reservations, free and open to the public, are required and can be booked

online at [storycorps.org](http://storycorps.org).

Local residents can bring a friend or loved one for a recorded conversation (no more than three people total) in the booth. Chene Koppitz, FIA communications coordinator, explained the StoryCorps team will facilitate the 45-minute conversations, and copies of the interviews will be available afterward.

In a meeting with community representatives last month, StoryCorps representative Danielle Anderson said the team is coming to Flint, at least in part, to solicit and capture “stories of the area that are not part of the assumed ideas of Flint, whether those be connected to the water crisis, the Flint Town narrative, or the crisis in American manufacturing,” Koppitz said.

### **Michigan Radio to feature some Flint excerpts**

Koppitz said later this year Michigan Radio plans to air a selection of the Flint interviews, and also host several

events in the city in connection with the MobileBooth visit.

She added edited versions of some of the stories might find their way into weekly StoryCorps broadcasts on National Public Radio’s Morning Editions or on StoryCorps’ digital platforms.

The recordings also will be preserved in the StoryCorps archives at the American Folklore Center at the Library of Congress.

The Flint stop is part of the 2019 MobileBooth tour, stopping in 10 cities. It started Jan. 5 in Orlando, FL and will conclude Dec. 21 in Yuma, AR. Other cities visited will be Birmingham, AL, Chattanooga, TN, Silver Spring, MD/Washington, DC, Philadelphia, PA, Columbus, OH, Memphis, TN, and Dallas, TX.

A StoryCorps team visited Flint several years ago — though not in the mobile booth — and the evidence of those encounters is documented in several dozen portraits on the walls of the

*(Continued on Page 13.)*

## ... Budgets

(Continued from Page 3.)

cial problems, or another state takeover of the city's finances. In the end, the mayor vetoed the budget, and a week later the council overrode the veto with a 6-1 vote. After the vote, 4th Ward councilwoman, Kate Fields, said she planned to propose budget amendments to avoid financial problems in the future.

However, as a part of the initial budget process, one other item was left out. The council failed to provide the \$320,000 needed to run this year's mayoral elections in August and in November. Though the money was restored, the oversight may have been a sign of things to come in this year's election.

Yet, in spite of all the strange and unpredictable things that have framed this mayoral campaign, it's an important election, and it deserves our commitment and attention. Take the time to learn about the candidates, and the issues, and vote on Aug. 6.

### The candidates

Here's a very brief introduction to the four candidates running for mayor, and ways to learn more about each of them. A forum with all the candidates has been planned as part of the Tom Sumner Program. The forum will be available for listeners on the program's archive after the broadcast as well.

**Gregory Eason:** He is the CEO and founder of Visions Unlimited consulting, served as Flint city administrator from 2006 until 2011, and served as president and CEO of the Center for Progressive Education, the Center for Banking Education, and Jobs Central in Flint.

**Sheldon Neeley:** He has been a member of the state House of Representatives for the 34th District since 2015, and represented the 6th Ward on the Flint City Council for nine years before being elected to the state House. He was a broadcast technician for WJRT-12 for 27 years and was a union president. His website is: [www.neeleyformayor.com](http://www.neeleyformayor.com).

**Donald Pfeiffer:** He is a business owner who has worked construction with several electrical firms with the IBEW Local 58. He was later hired as a director of operations for a minority-owned electri-

cal firm, and later opened his own construction company, where he assisted during the hurricane Katrina devastation, among many other projects. His website is: [www.abetterflint.com](http://www.abetterflint.com).

**Mayor Karen Weaver:** Before being elected mayor in 2015, Karen Weaver earned a Ph.D. as a clinical psychologist, and has served as director of behavioral services at Mott Children's Health Center and Chief Operating Officer of Ennis Center for Children. She was also the owner of Shea Lavelle Boutique, a specialty store for natural skin, hair and body products. Her website is: [www.karenaboutflint.com](http://www.karenaboutflint.com).

### The issues

As the candidates respond to the twists and turns of the campaign, several questions seem to be the most important for this year's election.

#### What about the ombudsperson?

As the first mayoral election under the new charter, the city is still working on appointing an ombudsperson. Several on the council were opposed to the new charter, and have been accused of slow-walking, or blocking the process. As Flint's past ombudsman Terry Bankert frequently reminds us, it's been 549 days (as of 7/2/19) since the charter began, and there is still no ombudsperson. Where do the candidates stand on appointing the ombudsperson, as required by the new city charter?

#### Charter Clock

July 2: 549 Days  
Without An  
Ombudsperson

#### Is the water finally safe?

Several federal agencies, and some scientific studies, have proclaimed Flint's water to be "safe," at least if a filter is used. Yet distrust and skepticism runs deep, and many in the city are not willing to trust "expert" opinion after the last five years of water crisis. Are any of the candidates willing to declare Flint's water as safe to drink? How will they restore trust in the water?

#### Were the charges dropped fairly?

Many were surprised when the state

dropped charges against the remaining eight defendants in the Flint water crisis. The charges were dismissed "without prejudice," which means that they could be refiled in the future. While some candidates took a wait-and-see approach, expecting new charges might be filed, others saw this as one more betrayal of Flint and its voters. Should charges be refiled? If so, what charges, and who should be charged?

The bottom line is this: in spite of the confusion and complexity of this mayoral election, be sure and get out to vote on Aug. 6.

It matters a lot for Flint.

EVM political columnist Paul Rozycki can be reached at [paul.rozycki@mcc.edu](mailto:paul.rozycki@mcc.edu).

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# Central Park celebrates new mural, one of dozens

By Harold C. Ford

*“Basically, the idea behind the mural is we don’t need to hate each other.”*

– Murales Lian, muralist

Flint’s Central Park Neighborhood Association (CPNA) celebrated the completion of a new mural on the wall of the *East Village Magazine* building, 720 E. Second St., by artist Murales Lian June 13.

The mural project was initially brainstormed by members of the CPNA’s Neighborhood Investment for Community Enhancement Committee. Nic Custer, NICE chairperson, told *EVM* last September, “We’ve been talking for a while now on how to improve quality of life in the neighborhood ...” with a three-lens focus on traffic, blight, and beautification.

The project received support from the Court Street Village Nonprofit Housing Corporation, the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, and the Flint Public Art Project.

The Central Park mural is just one of about 50 being created in the city this year through the Flint Public Art Project (FPAP). The muralists, some of the most renowned in the country and across the globe, are part of project director Joseph Schipani’s vision of lending Flint not just compelling beauty, but an international perspective and flair. Schipani said he hopes to see 100 murals completed by Fall 2020.

Murales produced a second mural in Flint during her stay here, too. It is at the Latinx Center, formerly the Hispanic Technology Center, 2101 Lewis St.

According to its website, “Flint Public Art Project (FPAP) supports collaborations among local residents and organizations as well as with leading artists ... from around the world, connecting Flint to regional, national and global movements to revitalize neighborhoods through art and design.”

## Spanish/American artist chosen for project

Murales Lian (her adopted artist name), a resident of Barcelona, Spain, was chosen for the project after making contact with Flint followers of Nomad Clan, a social network of international street artists. Lian, born in

frequently confined there for disciplinary reasons by her parents. Baldwin steered Lian in the direction of public mural projects where she discovered her passion.

Lian believes her ability as an artist is the result of “hard work” and not talent. “I don’t like to call it talent,” she said. “More important than learning how to

draw ... is learning how to see art” including art history, the vision of other artists, the context of artists’ lives, the philosophy and socioeconomic setting of artists’ lives.

Barcelona became something of a mecca for graffiti painting in the early 2000s, according to Lian. “People came from all over the world to paint in Barcelona. You could paint anywhere.”



***EVM*** writers watch mural work in progress  
(Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson)

Houston, moved to Spain in 1997 after being shuffled from state to state — seven in all — in her youthful formative years.

Lian is a citizen of both the U.S. and Spain by virtue of birth and marriage, respectively. She speaks five languages — English, Spanish, Catalano, Basque, and Italian. She identifies more as Catalan than Spanish or American. Catalonia is an autonomous community of four provinces, including Barcelona, that possess strong nationalist sentiments.

Lian was inspired to become an artist by Rachel Baldwin, a high school teacher in Georgia’s Camden County High School. “If it wasn’t for her, I’d probably be in jail; that’s where my life was headed,” Lian said. “She saw something in me.”

What Baldwin saw in Lian was not just a child who fit imperfectly in the public school setting, but a child with potential as an artist. Lian had picked up pencil and paper to combat boredom at home when

draw ... is learning how to see art” including art history, the vision of other artists, the context of artists’ lives, the philosophy and socioeconomic setting of artists’ lives.

## Imagining Flint

“It sounds a bit idealized,” Lian admits, but when she took on the Flint project “my goal was to make Flint a prettier place to live.” Her research from afar had revealed Flint to be, among other negative descriptors, “the second most dangerous city in the United States.”

“When I got here I realized it wasn’t anything like what I expected,” she said. “Amazing people. I never felt in danger a single second. People come up and talk to you on the street. It’s just been wonderful.”

## Envisioning the mural

Lian admits that her work is usually “politically engaging” with a frequent focus on feminism, prisoners’ rights, and refugees.

“As an artist, I feel obligated to communicate with a population,” she said. “My painting on this (the *EVM* building) wall is communicating with the public. So, what do I want to communicate? How do I want to communicate it?”

“What I felt like when I got to Flint was that I really didn’t want to do some-

(Continued on Page 7.)

## ... Mural

(Continued from Page 6)

thing critical,” she recalled. “What people in Flint didn’t need was more criticism ... People needed more of a celebratory thing, not to be given more shit, to hold all of the baggage they’re already holding.”

Lian met with a group of neighborhood residents to discuss the project. She was lobbied by the residents to create a mural that represented the diversity of Flint’s population.

Indeed, the Central Park Neighborhood — bordered by Longway Boulevard, Court Street, Gilkey Creek, and Chavez Drive — is one of Flint’s most diverse neighborhoods in terms of income, race, age, nationality, income level, and other identifying factors.

Subsequently, Lian traveled around Flint taking photos of people that she encouraged to physically embrace one another. She used those photos as reference points for planning her mural. Thus, the mural will include likenesses of Flint natives drawn from the photos.

Lian also drew inspiration for the Flint mural from a 1977 Spanish photograph. It depicted families, friends, and coworkers consoling one another after a Spanish fascist murdered five leftist lawyers in a Madrid trade union office. “I wanted to represent the emotion of that moment,” she said.

### A gift for Flint

Though Lian has received support for transportation, food, lodging, and art supplies, she is not receiving a commission for her Flint mural. Whatever their title — graffiti artists, muralists, street artists — they were rarely compensated for their work prior to the turn of the last century.

“Back when I started it wasn’t fashionable,” Lian recalled. “It was something that people did to communicate in the streets.” She said, now that it’s “fashionable” much of her work is commissioned.

When asked what force led to street murals becoming more fashionable, Lian’s one-word reply was simply: “Capitalism.”

The building is owned by Edwin Custer, an artist and longtime photographer for *East Village Magazine*, known for his distinctive black-and-white covers. His

brother, Gary Custer, founded the magazine in 1976 and ran *EVM* from that building for decades until his death in 2015.

Current *East Village Magazine* editor Jan Worth-Nelson noted that Gary Custer, who had majored in photojournalism at the University of Missouri, had a lifelong love of the black-and-white palette, establishing the magazine’s “look” since its inception in 1976 — a look that the magazine has retained, now a kind of “retro aesthetic” in the face of multi-colored trends. “I think he would have loved this mural,” Worth-Nelson said.

“I can think of no better way to celebrate Flint’s compelling complexities and *East Village Magazine*’s long history of telling the city’s stories than this gorgeous invocation of community love,” she added. “What a gift we’ve all been given by the project sponsors and *EVM*’s indefatigable and creative neighbors, the CPNA and Court Street Village Nonprofit.”

*EVM Staff Writer Harold C. Ford can be reached at [hcford1185@gmail.com](mailto:hcford1185@gmail.com).*

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# Sloan Museum breaks ground for \$26 million expansion, aims to foster kids' love of learning

By Jan Worth-Nelson

With calls from many dignitaries to champion science and history and ignite a passion for learning among Flint kids, ground was broken last month for a \$26 million renovation and expansion of the Sloan Museum on the Flint Cultural Center Campus, 1221 E. Kearsley St.

Renamed the Sloan Museum of Discovery, the facility will include a new early childhood gallery, a 10,000-square-foot hands-on science "Discovery Hall," a 11,000-square foot

revamped history gallery, a new "Vehicle City" automotive gallery, with cars from the existing Buick Gallery moved into the main building, a café, new gift shop and three new learning labs.

The Discovery Hall "will engage visitors in earth and physical science exploration, featuring a three-story Spaceship Earth exhibit" and a maker space, officials said.

The museum's Perry Archives also will be moved inside the main museum, allowing for increased access to research services, with an adjacent reading room for the Flint Genealogical Society.

The Early Childhood Gallery for play-



Architect's rendering — Sloan Museum of Discovery  
(from sloanlongway.org)

based learning for ages 0 to 6 is being developed in collaboration with the Genesee County Head Start program.

According to Sloan officials, the new facilities will increase capacity for field trip programs from about 60,000 to about 90,000 students per year.

Expressing delight about the major step forward, Todd Slisher, Sloan Museum executive director, said the museum is expected to open by late 2021.

Acknowledging an audience full of contributors, contractors, foundation heads and local leaders, Slisher noted, "A lot of work with community focus and advisory groups went into shaping

the final outcome."

Coming off a blockbuster week during which the Mott Community College Culinary Arts Institute opened and General Motors announced a new \$150 million investment at the Flint Assembly Plant, Mayor Karen Weaver said "the excitement continues," and noting the Sloan expansion will "add to the resilience of our children" and help the city relive its "rich history and tradition."

Slisher said 85 percent of the \$26 million needed for the project has been raised, with \$4 million more to go. He noted donations can be made at *DiscoverSloan.org*. and announced a Patronicity crowdfunding campaign would begin soon.

Immediately thereafter, C.S. Mott Foundation President and CEO Ridgway White announced a two-for-one match up to \$1 million for funds received through the end of the year for the project.

Major donors include a pantheon of some of the city's biggest players or those with historical links: the Mott Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the



Community leaders' multiple partnerships evident in Sloan groundbreaking



## ... Sloan

(Continued from Page 8.)

Hagerman Foundation, General Motors, Jeff and Annett Rowe, the Whiting Foundation, the Graff Family Foundation, the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, the Isabel Foundation, the Consumers Energy Foundation, the Hurand Family and the Serra Family Foundation.

Both Slisher and White stated no funds from the \$8.7 million/year Arts and Culture millage approved by Genesee County voters last August would be used for the project.

However, Slisher said, the millage funds, of which about \$1.8 million a year are expected to go to Sloan/Longway Planetarium, will allow the museum to offer free general admission to all Genesee County residents.

The Flint water crisis echoed in the motivation for improving education opportunities for children. Sue Peters, vice president of community impact at the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, reminded the crowd that “The water crisis impacted the entire community — especially our kids,” and noted the community’s concern that children be granted “the best opportunities to thrive and be successful.”

Becky Gaskin, executive director of the Hagerman Foundation, said the new facility highlights “hands-on discovery,” critical thinking and problem solving for kids. She noted the combination of family friendly design and attention to early childhood growth and development provided a “sweet spot” between the expanding facility’s potential and the Hagerman Foundation’s goals.

Ridgway White said the Sloan project provides an experience that is “interactive, exciting, provides links to the school curriculum, and ignites the spark to become a lifelong learner.”

State Senate Minority Leader Jim Ananich, a Flint resident who lives within walking distance of the museum, said the Sloan project “aligns the goals of the state — making education a top priority” and aiming to get the state in the top 10 in education nationally.

(According to U.S. News, it is presently ranked 37th.)

Adam Falk, president of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, on his first visit to Flint, noted that increasing the public’s understanding of science and technology is “incredibly important” and said the Foundation was impressed by how the



Adam Falk, Sloan Foundation  
(Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson)

Sloan’s approach combined science and the humanities.

“They aren’t two worlds — it’s all one world, he said, adding that art helps bring science to life.

Jeff Rowe, retired vice president of Diplomat Pharmacy and a longtime Flint resident, called the Sloan Museum “a gem of Genesee County,” and said he had brought his children and now grandchildren to the cultural center many times.

Lauding the Museum’s commitment to enhancing children’s love of science and the history of the area, Rowe said the expansion is “the right project at the right time in the right place.”

Architect/designer for the project is Haizlip Studios from Memphis, Tennessee. Slisher said the firm was selected from a competitive bid process where five firms around the country were invited to submit proposals.

He said Haizlip is a “museum speciality firm” that has designed more than 40 museums around the country, including the Children’s Museums of both Memphis and South Dakota, the Barnum Museum, The Tunica Museum, Beale Street Landing, The Arkansas River Valley Nature Center and others.

THA Architects of Flint are partnering with Haizlip, and E&L Construction Group, Inc., the same group, with THA as architect and

engineers, that are general contractors for the adjoining Flint Cultural Center Academy,

Slisher said E&L was selected from a competitive bid process that drew bids from seven firms.

During construction, the Sloan still is open at its temporary headquarters at Courtland Center Mall. More information available at [sloanlongway.org](http://sloanlongway.org) and at 810-237-3450.

EVM Editor Jan Worth-Nelson can be reached at [janworth1118@gmail.com](mailto:janworth1118@gmail.com)

### Lead/galvanized tainted pipes replaced so far in Flint:

**8,612**

Numbers provided by pipeline contractor ROWE Engineering are now posted at [cityofflint.com](http://cityofflint.com) under the Fast Start Replacement Program. Totals as of June 21 were **21,859 pipes excavated and 8,612 lead or galvanized replaced.**

**The City aims to have all of Flint’s lead-tainted service lines replaced by 2020.**

### Volunteer Distributors Wanted

The East Village Magazine is looking for volunteer distributors in some of the residential blocks bounded by E. Court, Franklin, Tuscola and Meade streets. Spend less than one hour a month getting exercise and insuring your neighbors get the magazine. Contact [ecuster@sbcglobal.net](mailto:ecuster@sbcglobal.net) or write to 720 E. Second St. Flint, MI 48503.

### Support community journalism!

Donations to *East Village Magazine* are tax deductible. For easy giving, go to: [eastvillagemagazine.org](http://eastvillagemagazine.org)



# Education Beat

## *Administration shakeups, service contracts highlight end of year for Flint community schools*

By Harold C. Ford

*“Our buildings are not worthy of the children that enter them ... There are lots of people who have been paid to do lots of things that have not done the things they were paid to do.”*

– Derrick Lopez, Superintendent,  
Flint Community Schools

Administrative shakeups and the approval of ten service contracts highlighted the end of the 2018-2019 school year for Flint Community Schools. After robust debate, the district’s maintenance contract with Commercial Sanitation Management Services was finally approved on a third vote by the district’s Board of Education.

### **New HR director hired at special meeting**

After debating terms of employment at its meetings on May 8 and 15, the board hired Cassandra Wilson as the district’s executive director of human resources at a special meeting on May 21. She replaced Michael Hall, whose employment was terminated by the board, effective June 15.



Cassandra Wilson  
(Photo by Harold C. Ford)

Disagreement over Wilson’s compensation package prevented her hire at the board’s regular meeting on May 15. According to the May 21 special board meeting agenda posted at the district’s website, Wilson was provided a salary of \$120,000. Casey Lester, the board’s assistant secretary/treasurer, had earlier estimated that a typical benefits package would increase Wilson’s total compensation

package to nearly \$200,000.

Wilson was introduced to the board at its committee of the whole meeting June 12.

### **Building administrative changes approved a month after the fact**

According to the district’s website, a new team of administrators was put in place at four buildings in the district, “beginning Monday, April 15, 2019.” According to the website post by Superintendent Derrick Lopez, the rationale for the changes with two months remaining in the 2018-2019 school year was “to ensure continuity of educational programming.”

The four building administrative changes all involved persons moving into “acting” positions and included the following:

- Christopher Ochodnický moved from the principalship of Neithercut Elementary to acting principal at Southwestern Academy.
- Connie Portice-Brown moved from assistant principal at Holmes STEM Academy to acting principal at Neithercut Elementary.
- Kelly Fields moved from a special administrative assignment to acting principal at Accelerated Learning Academy.
- Robb Whitman moved from a special administrative assignment to acting principal at Scott Middle School.

Whitman’s move was approved by Flint’s board of education on April 17, two days after the announced assumption of his new role. The moves by Ochodnický, Portice-Brown, and Fields were all approved on May 15, a month after their announced assumption of new roles.

### **Ten service contracts approved, not without controversy**

Ten service contracts for the 2019-2020 school year were approved by the board of education at its meetings on June 12 and 19. They included eight contracts that passed with little controversy and included services to the district for audit, food, waste removal, telephone, vending machines, lawn maintenance, central kitchen, and

repairs at Doyle/Ryder Elementary.

However, two other service contracts — for custodial and maintenance services — generated robust debate that dominated the two June meetings of the board. The maintenance contract was passed only after a third vote by the board that rescinded the first two votes.

### **Unhappiness with custodial services schedule triggered by balanced calendar**

Ken Andrews, director of maintenance and custodial services, unleashed a torrent of criticism by board members when he explained that a shortened summer vacation would necessitate a staged “deep cleaning” by custodial staff during intersession breaks in the newly adopted balanced calendar.

“So we’re not going to (deep) clean the schools before school starts,” Andrews told the board. “We’re going to wait until we have (eight) intersessions.”

“I do not support anything that does not start every student off with a freshly cleaned building,” said Diana Wright, board president. “One thing that parents look for at the beginning of the school year is that their kids walk into waxed, clean schools.”

“The issue is how to manage the cleaning cycle,” Lopez responded. “There’s only six weeks in the summer” with a balanced calendar and shorter summer vacation.

“Each building will have its own pattern of cleaning,” Andrews added. “You have to remember that when you opted into this balanced calendar you changed a procedure.”

“We’ve heard for eight years ‘We’re going to do a great job of cleaning your schools,’” charged Blake Strozier, board vice president. “When I walk inside a Grand Blanc, a Davison, a Flushing [school] and I compare it to what we have here ... it bothers me that those companies don’t look at us the same as they see those schools.”

“I just want confirmation that our children have the best come Aug. 7 (the first day of school),” Strozier continued.

(Continued on Page 11.)

## ... Schools

(Continued from Page 10.)

"I don't want to come to Southwestern and there's trash in the hallway and the company (employees) are standing out there and talking in front of the door and not doing anything."

Lopez explained that lack of monitoring has contributed to unsatisfactory custodial service. "People do what you inspect, not what you expect, and part of the problem is that when you don't pay attention, people do what they're used to doing unless there's a level of expectation."

"We have seen a marked improvement in that (inspection and expectation) since Ken Andrews has come on board," added Lopez.

Lopez also cited privatization as a challenge in providing satisfactory school services. "Districts have had to go to companies that are for-profit and don't necessarily have the pride that was once in our buildings ... community members who served in our buildings also had children in the buildings and they took pride in what they did," he said. "We're in a different era."

Ultimately, the contract with

Southfield-based VHM Enterprises, Inc. was approved by a 5-1 vote at the June 19 regular meeting of the board.

### Maintenance contract approved on third vote

The district contract for maintenance services with Commercial Sanitation Management Services (CSM) was flatly rejected by a unanimous 0-7 vote at the board's committee of the whole meeting on June 12. It also failed on a 3-3 tie vote at the board's regular meeting one week later on June 19. During the June meetings, all seven board members excoriated the work done for Flint schools by CSM.

"I cannot support moving forward with this (contract) until I see there has been an improvement," Wright said. "We met with CSM leadership because of the poor quality of their work." She produced some 90 photos for CSM to document their employees' poor work.

Lester pointed to three maintenance issues in the very room where board meetings are held at Southwestern: a hole in one wall; missing paint on another wall; and a nonfunctioning wall clock.

"It's a breach of contract when you don't fulfill your obligations," chided Carol McIntosh, board trustee.

"There are lots of people who have been paid to do lots of things that have not done the things they were paid to do," agreed Lopez. "We've been peeling back the onion of lots of things," he added. He told board members that his administration discovered a vendor that had been paid \$280 monthly since 2016 "that has not been doing a thing."

Lopez told board members that the broken maintenance situation in the district had improved during his 10-month tenure as superintendent. "When I came on board in August, I had an emergency (maintenance) situation nearly every week," he said. "That has stopped."

"That doesn't satisfy me," responded Vera Perry, board trustee. "If their work was not up to par we should not be going into another contract (with CSM)."

CSM is headquartered in Hudsonville, 120 miles from Flint in southwestern Michigan. CSM's website states "the industry needed a group with better client

(Continued on Page 13.)



# Isabelle DE BORCHGRAVE

FASHIONING ART FROM PAPER

## 6.15.19 – 9.8.19

Experience the intricate beauty of life-sized garments, made entirely of paper, exclusively at the Flint Institute of Arts.

Flint Institute of Arts

1120 E. Kearsley St., Flint 810.234.1695 [flintarts.org](http://flintarts.org)

 **FREE SATURDAYS**

The exhibition has been organized by Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Society of the Four Arts, Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Frick Art and Historical Center, Baker Museum, Flint Institute of Arts, and SCAD FASH Museum of Fashion and Film.

Isabelle de Borchgrave, Belgian, born 1946, *Maria-Maddalena d'Austria*, 2007, Mixed media, 74 x 47½ x 48 inches. Collection of the artist.

# THIS MONTH IN THE VILLAGE

*"This Month" highlights a selection of events available to our readers—beginning after our publication date of July 2. It is not an exhaustive list, rather a sampling of opportunities in the city. To submit events for our August issue, email your event to us by July 24 to [eastvillagemagazine@gmail.com](mailto:eastvillagemagazine@gmail.com).*

## Heritage & Harmony Festival

July 2-4

3-8 p.m. Daily

Organized by the Civic Park Historic Business District Association art and craft vendors and food will be at this event. There will also be music including Chris Canas and other blues artists  
Flint Civic Park Neighborhood  
Along the Dayton Street Corridor  
Admission ?

For more info go to

[facebook.com/heritageharmonyfestival](https://facebook.com/heritageharmonyfestival).

## Flint July 4th Festival

July 4

6 -11 p.m. Thursday

Atwood Stadium at Kettering University

701 University Ave., Flint 48503

It's a family celebration with fireworks and a performance by the Flint Symphony Orchestra.  
Visit [flinttown.info](http://flinttown.info) for more info.

## Kids Painting in Nature-Dragonfly

July 6

11 a.m.-12:00 p.m. Saturday

For families with kids 5 years and older. Local art instructor Andrea Lindon will teach the kids how to paint dragonflies.

For-Mar Nature Preserve, 2142 N. Genesee Road, Burton 48509

\$10 per student.

Pre-register by July 5 at 810-895-1748.

Visit [genesee-countyparks.org](http://genesee-countyparks.org) for more info.

## Flint City Bucks USL League Two -Pre-Professional Soccer Game

July 6

7-9 p.m. Saturday

The Bucks will play the West Virginia Alliance

July 13

7-9 p.m. Saturday

The Bucks will play the Dayton Dutch Lions.

Atwood Stadium at Kettering University

701 University Ave., Flint 48503

Visit [flintcitybucks.com](http://flintcitybucks.com) for more info.

## Tunes at Noon Festival

July 8-12, July 15-19, and 22-26

11:45 a.m.-1:15 p.m. Monday-Friday

At Willson Park across from U of M-Flint, 549

Wallenberg St., Flint 48502

(Rain Location at Greater Flint Arts Council, 816 S. Saginaw St., Flint 48502)

Different musicians each week.

Free admission.

Visit [genesee.fun](http://genesee.fun) for info and schedule.

## Creature Feature: Bats

July 11

7-8 p.m. Thursday

For-Mar on the Road Naturalists and some animal teachers will be at this interactive program featuring a live small animal encounter and hands on activities like a game or craft. Recommended for families with young children.

Bluebell Beach, Pavilion #1, 5500 Bray Rd., Flint 48505

Free admission.

Visit [genesee-countyparks.org](http://genesee-countyparks.org) for more info.

## Flint Second Friday ARTWALK

July 12

6-9 p.m. Friday

Downtown Flint

Various locations on and around Saginaw Street  
Visit Greater Flint Arts Council at 816 S. Saginaw Street for the walking tour.

For more info visit [genesee.fun](http://genesee.fun)

Free Admission

## Flint Alley Fest

July 13

4-10 p.m. Saturday

Buckham and Brush Alley, Flint 48502

This is the 9th annual event in Flint's Downtown Entertainment District with live bands on several stages, dancing, crafts, food & drinks, and more.

Free admission.

Visit [friendsofthealley.org](http://friendsofthealley.org) for more info.

## Acting Out with Flint Repertory Theatre

July 16

1-2 p.m. Tuesday

For-Mar Nature Preserve, 2142 N. Genesee Road, Burton 48509

Families with children 5 years and older will learn to create characters and stories from their imaginations or from literature. A Flint Repertory Theatre Educator will teach acting techniques, teamwork, confidence, self-worth and responsibility. Class will be outside weather permitting.

Free admission but pre-registration by July 15.

Visit [genesee-countyparks.org](http://genesee-countyparks.org) for more info.

## Bring It! Live: The Dance Battle Tour

July 17

7:30-9:30 p.m. Wednesday

The Whiting, 1241 E. Kearsley St., Flint 48503

From the hit Lifetime show, "Bring It!" Coach D and the Dancing Dolls perform.

For ticket info visit [thewhiting.com](http://thewhiting.com).

## Downtown Throwdown

July 24

4-7 p.m. Wednesday

Flint Farmers' Market, 300 E. 1st St., Flint 48602  
Stroll Farmers' Market and browse through arts and crafts, enjoy entertainment, games, and more along with food vendors and beverages.

For more info visit [Facebook.com](https://facebook.com).

## 38th Annual Flint Jazz Festival

July 25-28

Thursday, 5-11 p.m.

Friday, 3-6 p.m.

Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Sunday, 2-8:30 p.m.

Flint's Downtown Riverbank Park, One Riverfront Center West, Flint 48502

The four day festival begins with a Jazz Walk with live performances at several downtown clubs. The other three days feature performances at Flint's Downtown Riverbank Park.

Tickets are \$10 for daily admission and \$25 for a weekend Pass. Call 810-238-2787 or email

[greg@greaterflintartsCouncil.org](mailto:greg@greaterflintartsCouncil.org).

For more info visit [genesee.fun](http://genesee.fun).

## Fresh Flint Festival

July 26-27

3-6 p.m. Friday

10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday

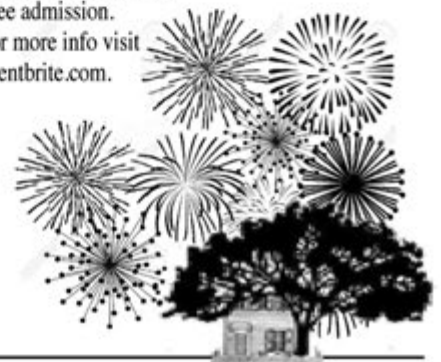
Dort Event Federal Credit Union, 3501 Lapeer Rd., Flint 48503

Two days of activities to support city residents in fitness and healthy living to help mitigate the effects of lead poisoning. There will be "sports celebrities, local musicians and artists physical activities and educational information."

On Friday there will be entertainment. On Saturday residents will learn how food affects your mind, body and spirit through Food Vendors and sports activities. Flint residents with ID can receive free physicals. Carnival activities, health care exhibitors, jazz music and art by local musicians and artists.

Free admission.

For more info visit [eventbrite.com](http://eventbrite.com).



## ... StoryCorps

(Continued from Page 4.)



Flint Public Library.

More than 500,000 people have participated since its founding, making it “the largest single collection of human voices ever gathered.”

EVM Editor Jan Worth-Nelson can be reached at [janworth1118@gmail.com](mailto:janworth1118@gmail.com).

## ... Schools

(Continued from Page 11.)

communication and service ...When we say ‘stay in touch,’ we mean it. Three phone calls to three different extensions at CSM on June 19 by this writer for further information were unanswered, as were the messages left on answering machines.

Following two board votes to reject the CSM contract, Lopez told board members: “We will have zero maintenance workers come July 1st in this district. We will have no way of actually getting our buildings ready for the fall. People will leave.”

Lopez pledged continued improvements and updates/scorecards every two months starting in July. Instructional staff now direct-


ly communicate their maintenance needs to CSM employees using SchoolDude, a cloud-based work order process.

He informed board members, “We do have a 60-day termination clause in the contract.” And, Lopez sighed, “there is no Plan B.”

Finally, Perry, the most vocal of the CSM contract opponents began the rescission process by signaling her willingness to reconsider her vote. “I’m going to be a thorn in your tail,” she warned. “I’m sick of it. It’s time for some doggone action.”

With that, the board accepted the 2019-2020 CSM contract by a 6-0 vote on its third attempt.

EVM Staff Writer Harold C. Ford can be reached at [hcford1185@gmail.com](mailto:hcford1185@gmail.com).



# IT'S TIME for NEW VISION

## VOTE GREG EASON FOR MAYOR

Tuesday, August 6, 2019 – Primary Election

**My focus as the Mayor of Flint:**

- Unify our City and bridge the racial and demographic divide through positive relationship building.
- Safeguard tax payers dollars
- Work respectfully with Flint City Council to achieve shared goals.
- Adhere to and enforce the Flint City Charter, its ordinances, enhancing and implementing the Master Plan.
- Initiate a full forensic audit of all funds to ensure fiscal accountability, and transparency.
- Work with local and state experts to resolve the root cause of Flint's water crisis and to restore and ensure safe usable water
- Ensure public safety, quality public service, reasonable water rates and fees.
- Promote a positive environment, beautiful and safe neighborhoods for families to live.
- Work diligently on creating economic development opportunities, job creation, building collaborative business and community partnerships.
- Work with community and youth leaders on ways to reduce youth violence, senseless murders, growing drug use and over doses that are plaguing our city.
- Establish a Regional Economic Summit for local, regional and international business opportunities and create a more diverse small business development ecosystem.

**I AM THE MOST QUALIFIED CANDIDATE FOR MAYOR**

- ✓ Thirty years' experience as a President & CEO in the private sector and public sectors.
- ✓ Founder of the Sylvester Broome Training Technology Center (\$5 million dollars in funding)
- ✓ One of the leaders responsible for bringing the Flint/Genesee County Jobs Corp to Flint
- ✓ Served as the City Administrator for the City of Flint managing day-to-day operations
- ✓ Implemented the Smith Village Housing Development (\$19 million dollar project)
- ✓ Implemented a CDBG Block Grant funding strategy for all City of Flint Senior Citizen Centers
- ✓ Managed over \$700 million dollars in federal, state, local and philanthropic funding
- ✓ Managed the largest American Institute of Banking school in Michigan
- ✓ Earned a Bachelor of Science; Master of Business Administration Degree and currently enrolled in a Doctor of Business Administration Degree program
- ✓ A member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity
- ✓ Master Mason – Eureka Lodge
- ✓ Lived in Flint, Michigan for over 40 years
- ✓ Married to Karen Aldridge- Eason and parents to 3 adult sons.

Please join my campaign by calling (810)-484-5099



# City of Flint facing allegations of failure to follow Open Meetings Act, FOIA and City Charter

By Melodee Mabbitt

An attempt to follow the story of Flint's pipeline replacement led a Flint resident to file a complaint to Genesee County Circuit Court, now under consideration by Judge Kay Behm, alleging that the City of Flint failed to follow the Open Meetings Act, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and the Flint City Charter.

"The overall tendency that I am seeing is one of avoiding the requirements of these statutes in order to suppress embarrassing information," said Linda Pohly of Flint, a local attorney and plaintiff in the case.

Pohly regularly attends meetings of the Flint City Council and closely follows the newly formed Ethics and Accountability Board. The 11-member board was created by Flint's new city charter, approved 2-to-1 by voters in August, 2017.

As detailed on the City's website, "Effective January 1, 2018, the updated charter is now the guiding document for the City of Flint." A nine-member elected charter review commission created the new charter. After numerous town halls and community meetings, Flint voters approved the new charter to replace the previous charter which had been in effect since 1974.

The Ethics and Accountability Board is charged with investigating complaints against public servants and city agencies. Another of its main mandates is to appoint an ombudsperson, which has not happened. Its meetings have failed to achieve a quorum several times and it struggled through most of 2018 to establish bylaws and set its budget.

According to Pohly, neither the City nor the Ethics and Accountability Board have seriously implemented the new charter, which voters approved to take effect Jan. 1, 2018.

According to Pohly's complaint, the City failed or refused to:

- Provide funding for the Ethics and Accountability Board.
- Appoint an ombudsperson.
- Require the chief financial officer to make monthly reports to council.
- Establish a Revenue Estimating

Commission.

- Require public bodies to comply with the Open Meetings Act.
- Obtain council approval before approving services from contractors.
- Compile rules, policies, and procedures on the website, and
- Establish a Human Relations Commission.

"There are things that go on in every organization, including the City of Flint, that the people who are responsible for the decisions would really rather not have publicly known. These charter requirements, the Freedom of Information Act, and the Open Meetings Act are antidotes to that human tendency," Pohly said.

City Attorney Angela Wheeler's office referred *EVM's* request for response to the mayor's office. That led to the office of Candice Mushatt, the City's public information officer, who requested questions be submitted in writing via email. That process is underway; answers received after publication will be posted online at [eastvillagemagazine.org](http://eastvillagemagazine.org).

Contacted through a phone number provided by Pohly's attorney, former interim chair of the Ethics and Accountability Board John Daly declined to comment on the litigation. He confirmed he was not provided and did not expect to receive a City email address.

*EVM* is attempting to contact the new chair appointed by the mayor, Loyce Driskell, however no email contact for her is available through the City.

If Pohly wins everything sought in the case, the complaint would require the City to undo decisions made in closed meetings, provide all information sought, uphold the new city charter, and take actions to prevent further violations.

Pohly said she hopes these outcomes will encourage the City's transparency during ongoing issues like pipeline replacement and financial struggles.

"I am not seeking any damages for myself. As a citizen of this city, I want the City to follow the law. It doesn't seem like too much to ask," she said.

## Claim related to "predictive model" settlement

Pohly alleges that both Flint City Council and the Ethics and Accountability Board violated the Open Meetings Act.

According to her complaint, Flint City Council violated the act by entering into a closed session to discuss a settlement agreement. That agreement, approved by the council in February, requires the City to use a predictive model for pipeline replacement that advocates contend may result in higher rates of lead and galvanized steel pipeline replacement per excavation.

The City's answer in writing to the court agrees that council entered into closed session, but denies that it was in violation of the Open Meetings Act because the council intended to discuss the settlement agreement from which conflict resolution proceedings were pending.

Pohly's attorney, Alec Gibbs, argues that existing precedent does not exempt the City from the Open Meetings Act because settlement agreements do not constitute ongoing litigation.

"There was no pending motion when they went into closed session. Furthermore, you have to establish that the risk of financial harm to the City from disclosure outweighs any benefit of disclosure," Gibbs said.

"In this case, it makes absolutely no sense because the settlement and all of its contours had to be entered into the court record the following day. So it is completely nonsensical to argue that there was any risk to the City. They just didn't want the deliberations to be open," he stated.

Pohly alleges that the Ethics and Accountability Board also violated the Open Meetings Act by entering into closed session to make decisions, failing to keep required meeting minutes, and deliberating in secret over email.

These allegations stem from a request for investigation submitted by Pohly to the board. Pohly requested the board investigate an alleged Facebook post by a board member that advocated for the resignation of four city council members, including describing two members as "evil."

(Continued on Page 15.)

## ... Flint

(Continued from Page 14.)

At the first meeting after receiving Pohly's request, the board went into closed session to discuss her request for investigation.

In answer to this allegation, the City admitted in their response that the Ethics and Accountability Board inappropriately entered closed session and requested that it be remedied at the next meeting, but denied all other Open Meetings Act allegations against the board.

### **Alleged Freedom of Information Act violations**

To prove her allegations against the Ethics and Accountability Board, Pohly submitted a Freedom of Information Act request on Jan. 10, 2019, to the City for Ethics and Accountability Board minutes and attendance records, complaints and requests for investigation, and communications both among board members and between board members and public servants.

In response, the City required \$201.69 for providing the documents. Pohly paid in full and in return received a box of documents she alleges did not include her own emails with board members or any communications among board members unless there was a communication with a person using a City of Flint email address.

In answer to the court, the City argued

that it had produced all records in its possession and that the Freedom of Information Act cannot require the City to produce City records from personal emails.

"I don't think they can circumvent the Freedom of Information Act by using private emails," Gibbs said. "The problem with the City's argument is that it would allow public servants to conduct business, including, we believe, deliberations in violation of the Open Meetings Act, which can only be revealed through disclosure of those emails. We're confident that the courts will agree with our position."

According to Gibbs, the City failed to provide City email addresses for the board members. "Because the City was trying to bury the Ethics and Accountability Board and not give it any resources so that it couldn't take any complaints and they wouldn't have to implement that part of the charter, they weren't giving them the very basic resources that they needed to do their jobs," he stated.

EVM attempted to contact the Ethics and Accountability Board by calling the City "contact us" line, the mayor's office, human resources department, and City Attorney Angela Wheeler's office.

No one who answered at these departments could provide a point of contact for the board. The receptionist did not recognize the name of the chair of the Ethics and Accountability Board and the board is not listed on the City's website

at the time of publication. The person in City Attorney Wheeler's office said they do not provide information about the Ethics and Accountability Board because "it is not a City board."

### **Alleged Flint City Charter violations.**

"The City appears to view the charter and its demands for greater accountability and transparency as an obstacle that they can ignore," Gibbs said.

The City's answer provided in writing to the court argues that efforts to uphold the charter are moving forward and that an ordinance allows approvals of services without council approval.

Pohly disagrees. "If there isn't enough money in the budget to follow the law, then they need to amend the budget to follow the law. If I get caught driving without insurance, nobody cares that I don't have the money to pay for it. The people that make the rules around here ought to be following the rules themselves. That is what this is about," she said.

In June, the case entered a six-month discovery phase, as is typical for this type of litigation, Gibbs explained. If no motions arise during the discovery phase, the court may schedule a hearing unless both parties are able to reach a prior agreement.

*EVM Staff Writer Melodee Mabbitt can be reached at melodee.mabbitt@gmail.com.*

*EVM Editor Jan Worth-Nelson contributed to this report. She can be reached at janworth1118@gmail.com.*

## ... Raptor

(Continued from Page 16.)

are small and plump, and I recognize them now as black-capped chickadees. They don't look like they need my cheap seed, but I cherish the peaceful satisfaction their feeding brings me.

The birds swoop in and land in a clump, then squeak and shove until four or five feed at a time. Those that don't make it to the saucer busy themselves on the ledge with the seeds the victorious ones scatter. A squabbling rotation with chest puffery and fluttering wings and the first feeders dart off and a new set of three or four wedges in. When the seed is mostly gone, a single outlier bird hops into the center of the saucer and picks at

the powder and hulls remaining.

I bought a tubular finch feeder and the variety of birds has picked up. Red-winged blackbirds and downy woodpeckers try their luck at the small holes. Next door, a rusted old TV aerial never dismantled by an aging neighbor attracts birds at 32 feet. In the evening, a large woodpecker drums on its hollow metal poles like an avian head-banger.

Neighborhood cats prowl. The first was Ralphie, a hefty marmalade-colored veteran with yellow eyes placed a bit too close together. Confident in his weight and age, he'd lumber along the perimeter of my backyard lawn in that cautious way of cats, wary of open space. Not needing the food of nature, he still practiced the habits of his species. Since Ralphie's

family moved away, a young, lean tiger-stripe appears on my porch in the morning. Eyes fixed on the finch tube, he stretches his body upward, gauging the distance to the feeder. He once succeeded; I found the feathers.

Each evening I shake out the hulls in the saucer and unhook the finch feeder, usually overdue for cleaning — every two weeks is the guideline. In summer twilight, days before the solstice, birdsong rises on the west side of the house, piercing the warm living room air even when the TV blares at prime time. The urgency of the birds' calls alerts me to the end of day; sometimes I hear a kind of panic in their sounds.

*EVM columnist Teddy Robertson can be reached at teddyrob@umflint.edu.*

## Village Life

# *A raptor crash heralded my life with birds*

By *Teddy Robertson*

Smack! The front legs of my chair leave the floor, my hands pop off the laptop keyboard; I jerk backward. A split second, then a tinkling sound ripples over my left shoulder. I turn and look: in the storm window beside me fissures radiate outward as if pushed by an invisible hand. Something's struck the plate glass almost dead center.

I'm out the door — scanning the front porch for a clue, but the missile lies farther away. On the lawn a small hawk rests belly down, tipped onto one shoulder where his wing meets his brown, speckled body. He quivers to right himself and then hazards a hesitant, off-kilter walk. A slow taxi to lift off and he's gone.

My storm window? The oversized sheet of glass, maybe four foot by five, is one of two that cover twin dining room windows, and probably custom made for my 50s house in Mott Park. With my index finger I trace the cracks from the outer edge of the glass to a tiny pinprick at the center of the pane. Incredibly, no fragments have fallen out.

I call Flint Glass Company (once Koerts Glass on Dort Highway for Flintoids). Billy, grandson of the owner I knew years ago, drives from Flushing to take down the wood frame. Two weeks later, he returns with the storm window re-glazed and snaps it back into its much-painted metal hinges. One hinge of the four is missing, but the frame holds.

The hawk event was seven years ago, just about the time I retired. I think of it now as the herald of my bird watching years. I'm late to this sublime pleasure. Birder friends have tutored me; maybe my raptor had been a young migrant gone astray? These folks know the seasonal patterns — the first robin in March, the juncos in winter. Their feeders attract coveys of fluorescent yellow finches; they sight northern flickers, indigo buntings, real bluebirds.

I marvel at what I have missed.

I grew up in northern California where my eyes were fixed on the ground, the clay, rock and brown grass of summertime. Our house was on a hillside and we had few



Mott Park goldfinch  
(Photo by Dennis Brown)

neighbors. I paid attention to gopher snakes and garter snakes. Rattlesnakes turned up some years (we didn't talk about climate change then). As a kid of seven or eight, I knew to look where I stepped.

I remember the nodding heads of California quail and grating screech of the western blue jays that everyone called mean, but what were the little birds they bullied? No idea. An owl roosted in a crooked pine tree outside the bedroom windows, a comfort to me at night. It sounded something like a Great Horned owl, so I've ascertained online, six decades later.

My hometown, Mill Valley, was lucky to have a passionate nature educator named Elizabeth Terwilliger. She promoted love of nature for 60 years and her environmental activism preserved many local sites. In her broadbrimmed sun hat, "Mrs. T." visited grade schools and led field trips to awaken kids' interest in nature. Generations of school children learned about the birds, marshlands, and butterflies of Marin County.

But by sixth grade I was transferred to a Catholic school where I learned French and poetry and not about nature. Decades later when my son was crazy about dinosaurs and together we practiced pronouncing their names, I somehow missed their evolutionary connection to birds. Archaeopteryx, missing link between birds and reptiles, lost out to Tyrannosaurus rex.

My partner, Dennis, once an avid hunter of dove in the California desert and wild

turkey in Missouri woods, is now a bird watcher. Hunting taught him about doves, our most frequent birds, and he explains their ground feeding and roosting habits to me. Driving the expressway in Michigan, he notes the woods and thickets that must be full of turkeys. I have Stan Tekiela's *The Birds of Michigan* field guide, a first edition bought at Young and Welshans 20 years ago for my mother, then newly transplanted to Flint from the West Coast. I watched her shriek in 80-year-old delight when she spotted a northern cardinal on the backyard shed in the snow. A few years later, bedridden and in hospice care, she could see birds flutter at feeders; we watched together when she could no longer speak.

The *Birds of Michigan* organizes species by color, a system of "mostly" black, "mostly" brown, and "mostly" blue. At first, the term "mostly" reassured me, but I grew baffled by the number of dun-colored females that turn up in different sections.

I move online and find the Cornell Ornithological Labs with its chart of bird silhouettes and learn the first identification step: size and shape. The robin is both a kind of thrush and a handy gauge of size ("is it larger or smaller than a robin?"). Clicking on the few species I know, I learned that tits and titmice are grouped with chickadees, that the cardinal is a kind of finch, that blue jays are related to crows, and that the starlings that carpet the lawn after a rain belong with blackbirds like the red-winged blackbird, grackle, and brown-headed cowbirds.

The Cornell site confirms that a young, broad-winged hawk probably hit my window, perhaps gone astray from his kin or "kettle," en route to Canada in spring. The mailman on my street, Nick, hails from Alaska; he knows about birds and wildlife and alerts the neighborhood Facebook page when he sights bald eagles that soar above the Mott Park Recreation Area.

Summer mornings I wake to the sounds of birdsong. I pour wild finch seed into an old terra cotta saucer on the ledge of my front porch. The quiet, routine task allows my last pre-conscious dream life to filter into the beginning of the day. The birds

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