

15 from '15: A North Shore year in review

By Steve Krause / The Daily Item | Posted: Thursday, December 31, 2015 3:00 am

This being New England, the weather played a big part in the story of 2015. From the excessively harsh February to an exceptionally mild December, it was never far from being the dominating topic of conversation.

But Mother Nature was not the only leading conversation topic yanked from the headlines this year. Other top topics included the recall of four of the five selectmen in Saugus; the announcement by Partners HealthCare that it would shift all of its in-patient facilities to Salem — closing, for all intents and purposes, Union Hospital; the unveiling of plans for a new Market Basket store in Lynn; a federal-state-municipal partnership on behalf of the city's growth; news that Marian Court College in Swampscott is closing; plans in Saugus to radically alter the landscape on Route One; an attempt to add an extra hour before last call at Lynn drinking establishments (defeated); the discovery of the body of missing Swampscott woman Jaimee Mendez and the capture of Jason Fleury, who is charged in her murder.

Also, a fire on Bruce Place in Lynn killed four members of the same family, including a pregnant woman. Other news headlines included the forfeiture of a football game in Swampscott and allegations of hazing (as well as the subsequent resignation, on an unrelated issue, of the high school principal); the continued opioid problem on the North Shore, including the March deaths of three people in 48 hours in Lynn; the end of an era in Lynn politics with Ward 7 Councilor Rick Ford bowing out and state Rep. Robert Fennell taking a new job; and the release, after 19 years in jail, of Angel Echavarria, who had been convicted of murder in the death of Daniel Rodriguez in January of 1994.

After a cold, but relatively dry month, snow hit with a vengeance Jan. 26 and dumped more than two feet on the region. Every successive weekend through Valentine's Day saw blizzards. By the first week of March, a total of 110.6 inches of snow had fallen during the winter, 64.8 in February alone. Both are records.



Market Basket

Arthur DeMoulas, left, had the attention of Secretary Jay Ash, Rep. Lori Ehrlich, Sen. Tom McGee and Reps. Brendan Crighton and Donald Wong as they focused on economic development in Lynn.

The winter had far-ranging ramifications, from problems with the MBTA subway and commuter rail, to unnavigable streets, to figuring out just where to put all the snow. Terms we became familiar with in 2015 included “bombogenesis,” which is the explosion of a low-pressure weather system into a major storm and “snow farm,” which is a designated area for dumping snow.

The difficulties prompted the City of Lynn to come up with a new plan to battle future harsh winters, including paying more per hour to heavy-equipment plow drivers.

As unusual as February was, even in terms of winter weather, that’s how unusual December was, but the other way. Records were set for warmth on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, as temperatures climbed close to 70 degrees. The reason given for the unprecedented warmth was a strong El Nino weather pattern, which generally spares the Northeast from the worst of the winter chill.

The problems with the MBTA, which included days when the service was shut down altogether and days when commuter trains were running hopelessly behind, presented a challenge for newly-inaugurated Gov. Charlie Baker of Swampscott.

Baker defeated Martha Coakley in November 2014, and the issues with public transportation forced the new governor to hit the deck running. With the help of State Sen. Thomas M. McGee, who is the chairman of the joint transportation committee, Baker came up with an \$82.7 million plan to improve the T’s service, including better equipment to handle winter weather.

Also sworn in last January was Congressman Seth Moulton of Marblehead, the new representative of the 6th District. Moulton made his presence felt right away, taking several noticeable stands — none of them more controversial than his support for the Iran nuclear deal. On Aug. 14, Moulton spoke before a congregation at Temple Emanu-El in Marblehead about his support for the deal.

Two days after the Jan. 26 blizzard, a body was found washed up on King’s Beach at the Lynn-Swampscott line. It was identified as that of Jaimee Mendez, a Swampscott woman who had gone missing in November of 2014. Subsequently, Jason Fleury of Lynn was arrested and charged with her murder.

Fleury pleaded innocent in court on Aug. 6. In an exclusive interview with The Item last Nov. 13, Fleury said he was with Mendez on the night of her disappearance, but denied that he killed her. He told The Item that Mendez was a go-between for drug deals.

Fleury’s defense team has filed three discovery motions — to obtain the notes of former Item reporter Cyrus Moulton, who interviewed the defendant in November, the preservation of any tissue from Mendez and other evidence gathered by the medical examiner, and a request of any and all conversations recorded or otherwise that Crystal Brown, a friend of Mendez, had with another witness and the defendant. The third motion was also a request for any photographs Brown took of the beach area or related to the case.

The motion pertaining to tissue preservation has already been acted on and the other two discovery motions will be acted upon when Fleury next appears in Salem Superior Court on Jan. 5. He is currently being held without bail at the Middleton House of Correction and last appeared in court on Nov. 30.

Opioids continued to be a major story, and a major killer, on the North Shore in 2015. According to the Essex District Attorney's office, as of Nov. 30, there were 148 deaths this year due to heroin overdoses, with December's figures yet to be figured in. Last year, there were 145.

Lynn Police report that there were 32 overdose fatalities through November of this year, and 305 overdoses in all. Already, the overdose figure is up from last year.

In one 48-hour period in Lynn in March, there were six overdoses and three of them were fatal.

On March 17, the voters in Saugus went to the polls with the task of either keeping the five-member Board of Selectmen as it was, or recalling up to four members over a dispute that culminated in the firing of Town Manager Scott Crabtree in 2014.

By the end of the day, the results were overwhelming, with Maureen Dever, Stephen Castinetti, Paul Allen, and chair Ellen Faiella all voted out. Debra Panetta, the fifth member, was not included in the recall.

Elected were Scott Brazis, Jeffrey Cicolini, Mark Mitchell and Jennifer D'Eon. Panetta was named the new chair.

The recall negated the appointment, made just a week earlier, of Sean Fitzgerald as the new Town Manager, and the new board quickly reinstated Crabtree.

At the beginning of May, Marian Court held its annual gala to thank supporters and benefactors. A little over a month later, the college announced it was closing due to declining enrollment.

The closure was a bitter pill to swallow for an institution that had just celebrated its 50th anniversary and graduated its first four-year class. Gov. Baker, speaking at that gala, had praised the school for its hope and optimism. But in the end, Marian Court's projected enrollment for the fall was weak, and it could not find funding to keep it going.

Also in May, 48-year-old Echavarria of Lynn was freed after spending 20 years in prison for the murder of Daniel Rodriguez in January of 1994.

Echavarria was found guilty of the murder in 1996, but the verdict was overturned due to questions about one of the main witnesses for the prosecution. Essex District Attorney Jonathan Blodgett said a lapse in time led to his office not pursuing the case any further.

Echavarria was released from prison on May 21.

June 30 brought devastating news to the Lynn medical community. Partners HealthCare, which runs both Salem and Union Hospitals, announced a plan that would move all in-patient care to Salem, effectively closing Union Hospital, save for the medical buildings there. Partners' plan didn't even leave hope that the emergency room would be kept in the same location.

The plan, which would leave a city of close to 90,000 without a hospital, triggered outrage throughout Lynn. Initially, this process was to take 18 months, but Partners announced in the fall that it had reassessed the situation and it would take three years to complete.

Meanwhile, a public hearing with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health on the issue will take place Jan. 7 at 4 p.m. at the Lynn City Hall auditorium.

Owners of Lynn's eating and drinking establishments tried again this summer to extend the closing hour from 1 to 2 a.m. The original rollback occurred in 2010.

Over a two-night public hearing on the issue, and spurred by statistics from Lynn Police Chief Kevin Coppinger on what a difference just that one extra hour can make on law enforcement and public safety, the city's licensing commission voted in August to stick with the 1 a.m. closing time.

In late September, police responded to a call about a bonfire at Phillips Park in Swampscott. When they got there, they reportedly found a group of youths performing calisthenics while naked.

As a result, Swampscott School Superintendent Pamela Angelakis decided to cancel the next game on the Big Blue schedule, which was against Saugus, and a forfeit was declared.

Earlier this month, it was learned that Swampscott High School Principal Edward Rozmiarek was placed on administrative leave after an investigation led Beverly police to his home. He resigned a week later.

2015 saw the fall of Route 1 icons including the demolition of Weylu's Restaurant in September — 17 years after the once-famous restaurant closed. The pagoda-style structure was not the only highway landmark to fall to the wrecking ball. The Hilltop Steakhouse, which opened in 1961, was also demolished in 2015.

The new year will see Route One Miniature Golf's orange dinosaur and other figurines replaced with the first mixed-use development proposed under the new zoning bylaws passed by Town Meeting this year.

The Collins Avenue Development will be a combined commercial and residential space with six buildings; two hotels, three apartment buildings, restaurants, a cafe, spa, and retail space.

Also in the works are plans for a WoodSpring Suites Extended-Stay Hotel. Developers are looking to build the facility on the three-acre piece of land currently occupied by Cap World.

Late fall saw the economy and politics make news in Lynn, beginning with the Nov. 6 announcement

that \$2 million in state money would pay for sidewalk, roadway and other improvements around the Federal Street site where a new Market Basket store is proposed for construction.

State Housing and Economic Development Director Jay Ash and Market Basket CEO Arthur DeMoulas headlined the MassWorks grant announcement and planners are aiming for a spring, 2016 start for the new store.

On Nov. 24, Ash came to Lynn again — this time with Baker and Moulton — to announce formation of a local, state and federal collaboration to support city development efforts, in part by helping to prepare waterfront and downtown land for construction.

December brought tragedy to Lynn. In the early-morning hours of Dec. 4, fire broke out and quickly spread at a three-family house on 24 Bruce Place in Lynn. While residents of the first and third floors were able to evacuate safely, four members of a second-floor family perished. They were Yasmin Cruz, 19, a 2014 graduate of Lynn English and a student at North Shore Community College; her mother, Maritza Cruz, 39, a home caregiver; Sonia Cruz, 36, Maritza's sister, who was pregnant; and Rodolfo Cruz, 28.

The building was destroyed. As of yet, the cause of the fire has not been determined.

Two veteran Lynn politicians ended the year by setting the stage for their departures from elected office. Ward 7 City Councilor Rick Ford decided not to seek reelection and capped off an 18-year council career at the council's Dec. 15 meeting. State Rep. Robert Fennell was hired to be Water and Sewer Commission deputy director on Dec. 14. As of Dec. 30, the 20-year East Lynn legislator had not set a date for departing the Massachusetts House.