

WACHAPREAGUE Times

News, information
& happenings from
the Wind Capital of
the World

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Time for the Next Course

WACHAPREAGUE NATIVE

CATHEY BELL summed up the general feeling that people have expressed about the announcement that the Island House will close Dec. 30.

"It's very sad news," she said recently, at the Wachapreague General Store. "But I cannot imagine that there is not something in the works to keep it going."

Others, sad and shocked by the news, said they will miss not only the restaurant, but also the events the restaurant cooked up, like the Oyster Roast and the Flounder Tournament.

Cindy J. Stauffer said that she found Wachapreague through the Flounder Tournament - and "it's what brought us to Wachapreague" from her life in Pennsylvania.

Two people, one from town, one from Accomac, who didn't wish to be identified, said they'd miss the pleasures of sitting in the restaurant and enjoying the view, but they hoped that a new owner might bring a new, more inventive menu.

One issue about the restaurant closing is that meals taxes bring revenue to the town - about \$42,000 annually, according to Mayor Charles Elliott.

And many people talked about the difficulties of getting fuel, when the dockside fueling station closes.

Harbormaster Sandie Pulchaski said that the town has gotten a waiver to allow a company like Pep-Up to come to the town dock to fuel boats, but of course, this is not a permanent solution.

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-30-

IN OLD-FASHIONED NEWSPAPER

lingo, reporters or editors would put "-30-" at the ends of certain stories, especially ones that were sent in bit by bit. The -30- signified that the story was at its end.

And so, for the Wachapreague Times, it is.

I've put out the Times nearly every month for two and a half years. My purpose was to write about the good people of Wachapreague and the many good things they do.

I think I've accomplished this task, at least as far as I've taken it. There are scores of people in town with stories to tell and experiences to share - but it will be up to someone else to tell them.

I'm an artist, a painter, and while the Times doesn't take a huge amount of time or energy, it takes enough that I notice. Enough that it gets in the way of paintings I want to make, projects I want to pursue and life I want to live.

I hope you've enjoyed the Times. I sincerely hope someone takes it over and makes it their own.

-30-

This and That

THE FIRST ANNUAL Holiday Stroll is set for Thursday, Dec. 18, from 5-8 p.m.

Based on the long-established holiday stroll in Nantucket, MA, the stroll in Wachapreague will offer participants a chance to buy holiday gifts, have some refreshments and maybe hear some holiday music.

Current Reflections Art Gallery will be open, as will the Wachapreague General Store, with exciting holiday food and drink. The Wachapreague Inn Gift Shop will be open, offering a variety of items made by artisans in town and on the Shore. Lilliston Seafood will offer chowder for sale, and the Island House will have hot cider - and for \$1, hot spiked cider. Lee Anne Shontere, artist and member of the Artisans of Wachapreague, will sell her creations out of her home on Main Street,

Judy Bilicki, who helped cook up the Stroll, said she hopes it's the start of a long tradition!

COMPETING PETITIONS have circulated in the past couple weeks, focusing on the quality of the work by Mayor Charles Elliott.

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Island House

BLAKE JOHNSON BOUGHT the Island House 15 years ago, and for the first year, slept on a couch in his office nearly every night.

"I didn't know what I didn't know," he said.

Johnson has learned worlds since, including that the restaurant business is a physical grind that he said he would only ask his staff to do if he could do it alongside them. Approaching 50, Johnson said he is finding that he wants to grind more with his mind than with his body.

That's part of the reason he decided to close the restaurant, which is prospering, newly renovated and as popular as ever - or more.

The Island House's final day, under Johnson's ownership, at least, will be Dec. 30.

JOHNSON AND HIS WIFE Martha grew up in Minnesota; they dated for two weeks in high school, but that was that.

Johnson enlisted in the Navy, accomplished the training that made him a SEAL, and in 1997, moved to Hampton Roads. Four years later, home in Minnesota for leave over Christmas, he met Martha again.

She was a teacher, working on a master's degree in counseling. They dated until May, when she finished her degree. She moved to the area, and in 2003, they married.

Johnson left the Navy in 2008. He had met John Payne, and they had a plan to start a corporate retreat south of Quinby.

But 2008 was not a happy time for corporate America, and the plan collapsed. Johnson and Payne continued to look for business opportunities, and in July 2010, they heard that the Island House was going up for auction.

They bid and Payne won the auction, paying, in the end, \$860,000.

JOHNSON SAID HE HAS treated the Island House with honor and respect.

"The first time I stepped into the restaurant, I recognized that the Island House name was bigger than any one owner, any one family," he said.

"It represents the heritage and spirit and history of the Eastern Shore."

One thing he learned right off is that "if anyone tries to change the Eastern Shore too quickly, they will be met with opposition."

"You can accept the way we live here," he said, "or you can move on. It was important to me to preserve that and respect it."

JOHNSON WROTE ON FACEBOOK about some of the high points of his time at the restaurant.

"From a wedding executed at the restaurant less than 24 hours after the Country Club burned down to outdoor catering during a hurricane, to a fundraiser put together in less than a week for our fire companies during the arsons... I have learned that Eastern Shore people are just amazing. Nowhere in my life

have I seen community like on the Eastern Shore, which has made this decision even more difficult."

He has focused his efforts on the military and Eastern Shore kids, with the annual SEAL-family oyster roast fundraiser being one of the hallmark events of Johnson's time at the restaurant.

The first year, he says, they raised \$12,000, and they thought that was great.

"But for 11 of the past 15 years," he said, "we raised more than \$100,000."

THINKING OF PEOPLE who have stood out, Johnson mentioned Debbie Shrieves, who worked at the Island House off and on from the time she was 14.

"Mark Franko, our chef, came on within the first three or four months, and went from dishwasher to head chef."

He talked about his management team, Richard Colonna and Cheketa Ferrebee.

"They've been all in," he said, noting that, coming from the SEAL team culture, he had high expectations, and no fear of difficult conversations, "and they took that on board."

Dana Floyd "was there before I even bought the place," Johnson says. "She bartended for years, was instrumental in our catering business. She was the customer-facing person."

AS FOR THE DECISION to leave, he said, the time was just right. He asked himself, "Do I want to do this for another 15 years, and the answer was no."

Today, the restaurant is at a high point, and in truth, Johnson is, too. If he waits longer, he said, his age will make him less marketable in the corporate world.

His two older children are in college and his youngest is in school at Norfolk Academy. He and Martha stay there during the week, and come home to the Shore on the weekends. And that's just not enough.

"The goal," he said, "is to be with Martha and Wyatt."

JOHNSON SAID HE WOULD "love to thank the people of Wachapreague for supporting us for 15 years. Locals night is always my favorite night," because he gets to see people he's come to know and care about over the years.

And he has come to care about a lot.

"As I now know the end is near, there are things that I cherish.

"A lot of nights, I'd come out the back kitchen door, and it's absolutely gorgeous. I never took the view for granted.

"There's an appreciation and sadness every time I look out the window now. It's simple things like that.

"I hope," he said, "that the town feels like I was a good steward."

This & That

A petition by Brooklyn Avenue citizen Sue Fountain charged, among other things, that decisions Elliott made "exceeded his authority" and added that "questions have arisen about Mayor Elliott's qualifications" to manage the sewer project.

A petition by Elliott stated that the mayor is performing his duties as he should be.

Fountain's petition also stated that Elliott had overstepped his authority in rescinding a contract to a sewer contractor in favor of a different contractor who, according to the charge, has a personal relationship with Elliott.

There are other charges in the petition, which was read into the record of the November Town Council meeting. An audiotape of that meeting is available on the town's website, wachapreague.org.

SOME NEWS FROM the Wachapreague General Store...

Dawn, who works at the store, is making holiday baked goods to order. This lemon cake was delicious! Contact her for more info.



We really do have the most unusual general store... now offering kittens, to the right home.

Contact Tracey for info.

And the store is now closed on Mondays.



MANY CITIZENS, including Sue and Gary Fountain, Aileen Joekel, Steve Joseph, Richie and Sandie Puchalski, the Wachapreague Volunteer Fire Department and many others have stepped up to help our town this year.

The pickle ball courts are freshly redone. New lighted garlands and holiday trees are making Main Street look festive and beautiful.

And if you drive down Atlantic at night, as you turn onto Bayview, look to the south for a special, sparkly treat.