

Neighbors Briefing

Norristown may establish its own housing authority

NORRISTOWN — Councilman Christopher Booth announced at a council meeting Tuesday that the borough is considering creating its own housing authority to seize control of what he called the rampant growth of low-income Section 8 apartment housing.

The creation of a housing authority would enable borough officials to police, inspect and regulate the program, which provides federal rental assistance to low-income tenants, said Borough Planning Director Judith Memberg. The program is administered by the county Housing Authority, whose stewardship has often been criticized by borough officials.

Memberg said that the proposal was only in the planning stages, and that legal work has begun on how to create and fund such an authority. The number of Section 8 housing units in Norristown has doubled in the last 10 years, from 332 in 1984 to 768 this year, leaving the borough with the highest density of low-income housing units in the county.

The bands will strike up, march at Hatters Stadium

HORSHAM — The Hatboro-Horsham High School Marching Band will hold its 20th annual Cavalcade of Bands competition, "The Tip of the Hat," Saturday at Hatters Stadium on Babylon Road, beginning at 6:45 p.m.

In addition to the state Liberty Conference champion Hatters Marching Band, on exhibition, there will be 13 competing bands, including North Penn and Archbishop Wood, also past champions in their divisions. Others to perform are Abington, Upper Moreland, Wissahickon, Lansdale Catholic, Souderston, Pennsbury, Methacton, Spring-Ford, Plymouth-Whitemarsh, Lampeter-Strasburg and Keith Valley Middle School.

The bands will be evaluated by professional judges on music, marching and overall effect. Advance tickets are \$4 for adults, \$2.50 for children and seniors. Gate prices are \$5 for adults and \$3 for children and seniors. Tickets may be purchased through Hatboro-Horsham band members or the high school office at 215-441-7900.

NOW chapter to discuss the feminization of poverty

LAFAYETTE HILL — The Montgomery County chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) will present a program by Carol Crepps on "NOW's Stance on Welfare Reform" from 8 to 9 p.m. at the general chapter meeting tomorrow.

NOW is concerned with what it sees as the increasing feminization of poverty. National NOW President Patricia Ireland has said that the first priority in welfare reform must be "ending poverty as we know it."

Crepps is one of the co-editors of the chapter newsletter. The general meeting starts at 7:30 p.m. and will be held at the Jeanes Memorial Library, on Joshua Road above Germantown Pike.

Free assistance offered to veterans, dependents

AMBLER — A county Department of Veterans Affairs service officer will be available to assist veterans and dependents at the county Information Center, 2 W. Butler Ave., from 2 to 4 p.m. Friday. No appointment is necessary but proof of veteran or dependency status will be requested.

The service officer is available to provide assistance with federal, state and county veterans' matters.

A fair way to find and buy works by master crafters

GWYNEDD — The 22d annual crafts fair of Foulkeways Retirement Community will be held from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Nov. 3 in the community center.

All items are made by resident master crafters. They will include stuffed toys, teddy bears, dolls, children's knitwear, smocks, bibs, crocheted chenille and knitted hats, semi-precious stone bolas, vintage-fabric pillows, Christmas decorations and many ceramics.

Visitors can sit for a pencil portrait, have knives sharpened and enjoy cider, hot drinks and scones at a refreshment stand. The entrance to Foulkeways is on Sumneytown Pike. For more information, call 215-643-2200.

Preserving open spaces a subject for discussion

HATFIELD TOWNSHIP — The township's Board of Commissioners and Planning Commission will meet to discuss the Open Space Plan at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 2 at the township administration building on School Road.

The township must complete the plan, which will include recommendations for land purchases and open space preservation, to receive \$1 million in county Open Space Grant funds. A second meeting will be held with the township's Parks and Recreation Board at 7 p.m. Nov. 7, also at the administration building.

A representative from Carter Van Dyke, the township's open space consultants, will present its findings at both meetings and ask for guidance on future park acquisition and development. The meetings are open to the public. For more information, call the township at 215-855-0900.

Code officer suspended for selling condemned house

Norristown's municipal administrator said the ethics code was violated. He made sure everyone has a copy.

By Jere Downs
INQUIRER CORRESPONDENT

NORRISTOWN — A borough code-enforcement officer has been suspended indefinitely pending an investigation for condemning a house, buying it and then selling it to a landlord, according to borough officials.

Municipal Administrator Anthony Biondi said he distributed the entire code-enforcement department — and all 230 borough employees — after

hearing that the practice was not uncommon.

"If this ever happens again, it will end up in termination," said Biondi. "I think that section [of the ethics code] should be read to all employees when they come in."

Biondi said Don Cipollini violated the section of the ethics code stating that no employee or official shall deal in any real estate transactions connected with the disposition of his or her duty.

In September 1993, Cipollini con-

demned a house at 1017 Green St., citing electrical problems and unsanitary conditions, and then purchased it for \$1,450 in May. In August, he sold it to Joseph Gallo, one of Norristown's largest landlords, for the same amount.

Cipollini could not be reached for comment.

"They're trying to blow something out of proportion," said Carl Carbo, the borough's plumbing inspector and a 14-year code department employee. "I used to buy houses and fix them and sell them, until I read the code."

When he was informed by other code-department employees that the

practice had been common, Biondi said, he had a meeting with the department and sent a memo to all borough employees.

"I want to make sure that everybody understands their duties, and the responsibilities and restrictions that come with these duties," Biondi said.

Biondi said he then learned that the ethics rule was implemented after a former code-enforcement employee built a landlord business of 25 to 30 apartments through condemning them and buying them at sheriff's sale in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Gallo said he was unaware of Cipol-

lini's professional connection to the property.

"He [Cipollini] approached me and said he intended to fix it up, but it was too much work for him," Gallo said. "It was cheap, so I bought it."

Councilwoman April Young, who heads the council's personnel and administration committee, said Cipollini should be fired because "he was looking out after his own" interests.

Biondi said Cipollini, a borough employee for six years, was not terminated because of his prior exemplary record and his contention that he was unaware the practice was not allowed.

Some rap about dropping science, but this rapper promotes it.

Message on math comes booming

By Wendy Greenberg
INQUIRER CORRESPONDENT

EAST NORRITON — The beat was loud and pulsating.

Inside the gymnasium of East Norriton Middle School, rapper Grand Hank (alias Tyraine Ragsdale) cajoled the students to move their bodies and clap their hands. A few teachers couldn't help but move their shoulders a bit.

Amid the flashing lights and rhythmic prose, Grand Hank proclaimed the value of mathematics and gave a crash course on African American scientists.

The school assembly last week kicked off the Merck Mentor Program, in which volunteers from Merck & Co.'s Manufacturing Division in Upper Gwynedd are going to East Norriton to help students improve math skills.

Using rap music to motivate math students may be unusual, but Ragsdale said it is effective.

The rap program was brought in, said Merck program coordinator Alicia Harper, because Ragsdale, a scientist at the Robert Wood Johnson Pharmaceutical Research and Development Center in Spring House, is a good role model.

Through his company, Grand Hank Productions, based in Philadelphia, Ragsdale has appeared at area schools, hospitals and research companies.

"I feel that rap music has been getting a bad rap," said Ragsdale. "It's very important that we use it as a medium to teach."

He used it to introduce and discuss such African Americans as Garrett Morgan, who developed the traffic light; Benjamin Banneker, mathematician and astronomer; and Charles Drew, who founded the American Red Cross blood bank.

A sample lyric:
Here's how Elijah McCoy became so great.

He made a device to help engines self-lubricate.

As a result machinery could run longer and faster.

His name will live on in the here and after.

"To be successful," he told students, "you must have clear, stated goals. To be the best takes everything you've got."

Some students need a push. "Given extra attention, they can achieve academically," said East Norriton teacher Angela McIver.

To that end, the assembly and the Merck program have as a common goal getting minority students interested in math and science careers.

"The goal is to increase the numbers of African American students placed in alge-

bra by freshman or sophomore years of high school," McIver said. "The numbers of African American students from the borough [of Norristown] are not as many as we want in the college track. The benefits to the kids are that they get to work in small groups."

East Norriton teachers have selected 16 students based on interest, promise or need to meet with a pool of 30 mentors every Wednesday morning. The mentors also accompany students to special events such as bowling or picnics.

"It helps me with my math," said seventh grader Lance Wilson, who is beginning his second year in the program. He was particularly impressed with a tour of Merck, especially when the students got goggles.

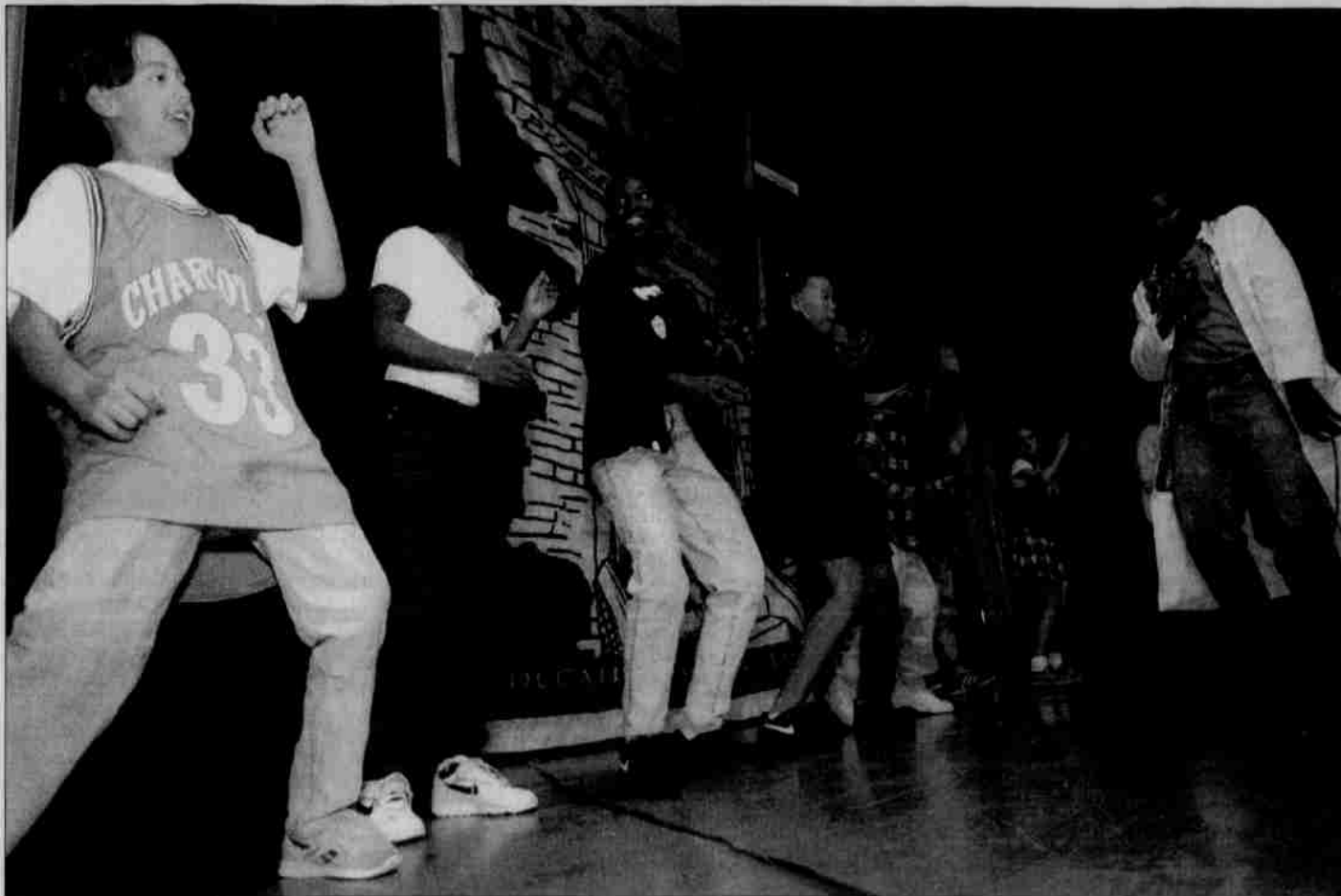
Sixth grader Viola Sibley said she wanted to be a math or chemistry teacher. "I like meeting a real scientist," she said.

The program is offered only at East Norriton and concentrates on reinforcing basic mathematical principles. The tutoring is tied to the curriculum, which focuses on problem-solving rather than computation, said McIver.

Mentors are from throughout Merck. Mentor Michael Aldridge, a maintenance supervisor, recalled that "there was no one there when I was in school, and I saw a lot of people struggle. I was lucky that for me, math came easy, but others fell through the cracks."

"This is about more than math," said Aldridge. "It shows school does pay off."

For Merck industrial engineer Regina Briggs, the mentor program is a chance to help encourage members of minority groups to become engineers and scientists. "We wanted to have an active part in that," she said.



From left, Patrick Falcone, 12; Josepha Whittaker, 13; Viola Sibley, 13; and Cashe Moody, 13, get into the act at East Norriton Middle School. Amid the fun, the students learned about the value of math and about African American scientists.



In his Grand Hank persona, Tyraine Ragsdale tells sixth, seventh and eighth graders at East Norriton Middle School about the importance of education, parents and morals.



Gym teacher Sue Kidder responds as many adults do to rap music. Ragsdale is also a scientist with Merck & Co.

As tempers rise with the stench, Conshohocken seeks solution

New limits on sewage concentration are proposed. Officials hope to curb odors from the plant.

By Rhonda Goodman
INQUIRER CORRESPONDENT

CONSHOHOCKEN — Jim Pieffer has had enough.

He says he is tired of closing the windows of his Walnut Street home to keep out the odors that emanate from the borough's sewer plant on East Elm Street.

"In the summertime, it's really horrible," Pieffer said. "The smell is rotten. The problem has never been this bad in the past."

Pieffer is hardly alone. As of Tues-

day, the borough had received 53 calls this year about the plant.

Borough officials are writing an ordinance that they hope will solve the problem — by setting new limits on what concentrations of sewage industrial and commercial companies can send into the plant. The ordinance is to be introduced at a meeting this week, at a time to be announced.

Corporations are limited to 250 milligrams of raw sewage per liter of effluent. Surcharges are applied on any effluent found to contain a higher

concentration. Borough Council President Gerald McTamney said the standard is too lenient.

"That's the problem, and we're paying the price," he said. "We are doing what we can to stop the odors. The Sewer Authority does not get the calls. We do. And I'm tired of all of the complaints."

But Jenifer Fields, a sanitary engineer for the state Department of Environmental Resources who serves as a consultant to Conshohocken, said placing further limits on industrial and commercial companies will not do away with the odor.

She does believe that the concentration of sewage entering the plant is

the problem.

"We haven't figured out what exactly is causing the odor, but it is something that's coming into the plant," she said. "It's not from an operation problem. I go there on a weekly basis, and everything is running normally. And it's not something the plant can change to stop it."

Fields said workers are researching odor neutralizing systems that might be installed on the first tank, which, she said, is the source of the odor.

The borough is also considering an ordinance that would take away the day-to-day operational powers from the Sewer Authority, and transfer them to the borough.

Said McTamney: "These odor problems have been raised for years. We have an authority that is supposed to deal with them, and they have done nothing."

The five members of the Sewer Authority, who are appointed by the Borough Council, act as a quasi-judicial board.

Sewer Authority Chairman Louis Williams said he was insulted by the council's efforts.

"They're saying that we are not capable of running the plant ourselves. That's not true," he said. "I have had a lot of restless nights trying to think about how we can take care of those people."