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Legislature Changes Hands

By Nate Dougherty

Tompkins County needs a long-term view and collaboration to tackle the challenges in the coming year, says newly-elected County Legislature Chair Michael Koplinka-Loehr (D-District 11).

In his first State of the County address, Koplinka-Loehr acknowledged several fiscal and other issues facing the county, all of which should be met with a united approach. "No leader, manager, or citizen can operate effectively in isolation," he said. "We all need the balance of each others' perspectives in decision-making and priority-setting to achieve the best for the public good."

Koplinka-Loehr stepped into the chair after Legislator Tim Joseph (D-District 12) announced in December that he would not seek a seventh term as legislature leader. In stepping down, Joseph noted that he is considering other state and county positions, including the county administrator post to be filled later this year.

Joseph instead will serve as chair of the Public Safety Committee, with former committee head Leslyn McBean-Clairborne (D-District 2) moving to chair the Facilities and Infrastructure Committee. Legislator Nathan

Shinagawa (D-District 4) will take Koplinka-Loehr's role as chair of the Budget and Capital Committee.

With 11 years of service on the legislature, Koplinka-Loehr spent the past three as chair the Budget and Capital Committee, and had chaired the Government Operations Committee for three years. He also served three years on the Ithaca school board.

In nominating him for

the post, Kathy Luz Herrera (D-District 5) said Koplinka-Loehr will focus on cooperation. "He will bring the community together in ways that make all of us stronger," she said.

Koplinka-Loehr sees two distinct perspectives for county lawmakers, which he compares to a rabbi who held two stones in his pocket. The first said, "For your sake alone was the universe created," while the second said, "you are but dust and

ashes." Together, the stones represent that while each individual is precious, so too is the way they fit into the universe.

"While seeming contradictory, both of these perspectives hold universal truths," he said. "In many situations we find we need to hold dualities like these in tension, which allows us to respect the individual while keeping a broad perspective for the good of the whole."

From the outside, the county has made significant strides and earned praised for its innovation, he noted. He cited a new communication system for first-responders, a 20-year capital plan that's gained statewide recognition, and innovative diversity and inclusion policies have helped change the culture in county governments as among recent accomplishments.

"From transportation to human services, to emergency planning to public safety and health, to economic development and tourism promotion, Tompkins County government is looked to as a place where program innovators continually adapt to changing external forces to best meet community needs," Koplinka-Loehr said.

Looking from the inside, he projects a time of change

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Photo by Ann Krajewski

GLOBE-TROTTER: Dominic Frongillo, right, had an eye-opening experience in Bali, attending the United Nations Climate Negotiations. The Caroline town council member listened to Al Gore and consulted with his young peers from around the world on the global warming issue. At left is his brother, Rafael, a student at Cornell. See story on Page 2.

Assisted Living Project Put on Hold

By Andres Perez-Charneco

With a new location and support from local health professionals, South Pointe Associates hoped for a favorable response from the Town of Ithaca Board for their proposed 80-bed assisted living facility. Those hopes were, for the moment, dashed by town lawmakers.

"We think this is a much better piece of property," said Chris Vitale, who, along with his brother Paul Vitale, is the developer of The South Pointe Assisted Living Community.

The board did not dispute the proposed facility's potential value, yet still considered the location inadequate, albeit an improvement from the original.

In November the developers proposed to build their facility off of Route 13 near the old Turback's restaurant and across from lower Treman State Park. The

board suggested the Vitales look into another site, citing concerns about transportation, safety and the impact on a bordering conservation zone. The new 10.69-acre location is catty-corner to the entrance to lower Treman State Park, just past the intersection of Routes 13 and 326, about two miles from downtown Ithaca.

Before last week's presentation, the board heard from Betty Falcao of the Tompkins County Health Planning Council, a division of the Human Services Coalition. She offered an insider's perspective on assisted living facilities. "We sorely need assisted living beds in Tompkins County," said Falcao.

Assisted living encompasses enough on-site care without the institutional nature of skilled nursing facility. Such arrangements allow residents to balance security with a sense of independence, Falcao ex-

plained.

The Vitales' facility would accept only Medicaid-eligible residents, allowing those with limited income to enjoy a care option usually reserved for the wealthy. "The need has always been there, it's [just] been a question of how much the state is willing to fund," added Falcao. She also noted that local facilities improved the quality of life of residents, who benefit from the proximity of family and friends that can assist the staff in the care of their loved ones.

"It certainly is a better location," said Supervisor Herb Engman, "but I do still have some concerns because we are trying to preserve open space." He said that the facility would occupy more space than a single home and would look out of place adjacent to a state park. He also noted that this side of the town lacked a dedicated fire station.

"Because this area is zoned as low density residential, a facility like this is still not really compatible with the location," said Engman. He suggested moving the issue to the planning committee before going to the formal planning board. The new committee was created in the wake of Engman's recent election win, with the goal of further involving citizens in town business.

Board member Pat Leary remembers hearing similar discussions when Longview and Kendall were initially proposed, and says that the committee process would help reach a compromise. "I think we should indicate that this is something we want to bring to the next step," she says. The South Pointe Community would be one of the planning committee's first responsibilities. However, any final decision would be

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Climate Talks a Learning Experience

By Ann Krajewski

Dominic Frongillo has returned from Bali, Indonesia, more enlightened about global efforts to save the planet after attending the United Nations Climate Negotiations were held. As a member of SustainUS, a national network for sustainable development run by individuals from ages 13 to 26, Frongillo was one of 22 students and young professionals who were chosen to represent the U.S., along with the official delegation from our country at the talks.

"It was incredible. Almost every country on the planet was represented," says Frongillo, a member of Caroline's town council. He was in Bali from Nov. 29 to Dec. 14, and though a little over two weeks sounds like a lot of time to accomplish the stated goals, Frongillo says, "It was such a concentrated experience, there was something to do every single moment." It was routine for the SustainUS delegation to be at conferences from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. with our policy team staying up late into the night working."

The three key messages SustainUS tried to convey at the meeting are: "The U.S. delegation does not represent the American public, which wants action;" "Our future is at risk and we are not being protected;" and "This government is deciding our future for us." These statements were in contrast to the official U.S. delegation, which, according to Frongillo, skillfully



Photo provided

Dominic Frongillo, left, plants a bamboo tree at Bali Sustainable School during his visit to Indonesia for the United Nations Climate Negotiations.

sidestepped hard questions like whether the U.S. would approve a binding agreement on CO2 emissions reduction.

Lead U.S. negotiator Dan Reeve Snyder met these questions with statements such as, "nothing is off the table," says Frongillo, and other delegates giving long-winded speeches in order to wind down the clock so that SustainUS and other groups would not have enough time to pin them down and get some real answers.

It became clear to many that the one country impeding negotiations was the U.S., he says. At one point, Frongillo tried to assuage the fears of a delegate from Togo. "When he explained his concern about climate change in his country and asked when America would wake up to the crisis, I did my best to assure him that Americans were also extremely concerned, that they were rising to the climate challenge and that a political movement was building."

One of the highlights in Bali for Frongillo was attending an impassioned speech given by former Vice President Al Gore, who had just flown in from Oslo, Norway, where he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. "This huge plenary room was absolutely filled to capacity, and being that Mr. Gore is so well respected internationally, the room just exploded with applause as people rose to their feet when he made his entrance. I was within 20 feet of him as he walked by, and I thought to myself, Wow! That really is Al Gore walking by me!"

Gore's speech was as frightening as it was compelling: "The rate of

climate change is happening faster than previously thought and the latest updates indicate that summer polar ice may completely disappear not in 2100 or 2050, but as early as 2012. Given the startling acceleration of climate destabilization, a strong commitment from all the countries is essential."

"He told it like it was. He even went so far as to say that it is his own country that is the main contributor of greenhouse emissions, and that he strongly disagrees with the Bush administration's policies," says Frongillo. "It was historic in that a person in his position rarely stands up publicly and directly criticizes their own government." Frongillo adds, "I really look up to him, because he has devoted his whole life to this issue. He has probably done more than any single person to raise awareness on climate change and that's really something, as I try to do that in my own way."

While the trip to Bali was exhilarating, yet frustrating and exhausting, Frongillo found the energy when the conference ended to join his family for a holiday getaway to his ancestral homelands in southern Italy. "It was spectacularly beautiful with its rolling foothills and rural villages. Really unforgettable," he says.

Now that he's home, it's back to business, including his work as a council member. But it's not business as usual because Frongillo has gained a new perspective on the world in which we live and has seen firsthand how crucial it is for our country to work with other nations, and take the issue seriously. His experience with SustainUS at the Bali negotiations has also reinforced an appreciation for others working to ensure our future.

"It's been a privilege to have worked with so many committed people on this most important of issues that we all have to face," Frongillo says.

For more information on the events in Bali, including photos and blogs, visit www.sustainus.org.

YMCA Hosts Open House for All Ages

The 2008 Y Open House will have a twist of youth and senior sports with our theme "You've got to Move It". The Graham Rd facility will be open, Tuesday and Wednesday Jan. 15 and 16, for seniors 60 and over, and Saturday and Sunday, Jan. 19 and 20, to the general public.

Senior programs include dance, gentle Yoga, core Pilates and snacks. Saturday will include a morning of youth programming including swimming lessons for all ages, youth sports, basketball and

indoor soccer. A racquetball tournament will begin at 9:30 a.m. with special events taking place from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. in cooperation with Cornell men's and women's sports.

Also on Saturday is Meet the Coaches and teams of the Big Red in the gym and participate in drills and skills clinics. For those in attendance, healthy food will be provided and door prizes will be awarded in the youth activity area

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