



## Road closings set June 11 for Escape the Cape

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## House of the week

B1



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# Homelessness increasing across the county

## High rent and home prices, extensive red tape driving housing crisis

By JACK FICHTER  
Cape May Star and Wave

VILLAS — Exorbitant rents and home prices coupled with red tape for those seeking government assistance continue to drive up Cape May County's homeless population.

Five county councils of Knights of Columbus held a well-attended forum May 31 at St. John Neuman Parish to discuss solutions to the crisis.

Assemblyman Antwan L. Mc-

Clellan (R-1) said his legislative team of Assemblyman Erik Simonson and state Sen. Michael Testa had a meeting with county social services and Middle Township administrators.

He said Cumberland County has a homeless shelter, something Cape May County lacks.

"I was trying to see if we could put those two worlds together to see if we can get those that are less fortunate, that are hanging out in Rio Grande, to the shelter in Cumberland County, and what I discov-

ered at that meeting is the red tape in just unbelievable, the things that people have to qualify for in order just to get the services," McClellan said.

He said he attended the forum to learn what more the legislative team could do at the state level to cut the red tape and get help for homeless individuals.

McClellan called the housing situation in Cape May County "abysmal," noting homeless persons may be "kicked out" of rental properties in the summer by landlords

who want more lucrative tourist business.

Maria Elena Hallion, executive director of The Branches Outreach Center, said the organization serves breakfast and lunch to homeless persons five days a week and operates a food pantry.

"We also put groceries in a van and take them to two motels where families are residing and also to two recovery houses," she said.

The Branches offers showers, free clothing and advocate services, meeting with unsheltered

persons to find a resolution or improvement to their situation, Hallion said.

"We can report that 70 percent of the guests that come into the Branches Outreach are experiencing unsecured shelter, living in their car, living in the woods, living in motels," she said.

The Branches serves meals to about 35 people each day, but not the same 35 persons. She said about 170 different people find

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Frank Scott/Special to the STAR AND WAVE

## West Cape May Strawberry Festival

Victoria, Elizabeth, Christopher and Catherine Lockington of Hamilton Township enjoy strawberry shortcake from the Cape May County Technical High School booth with the Strawberry Man (Tyler Murnagham of Cape May Court House) during the Strawberry Festival on June 3 in West Cape May.

## Zoning Board rejects pool at Village Greene

By JACK FICHTER  
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — The city's Zoning Board approved an addition to a Village Greene twin unit but voted unanimously against a variance for the installation of a swimming pool, which are not permitted in the development of attached units.

Attorney Ron Gelzunas appeared at a May 25 meeting on behalf of Scott and Sarah Fisher, owners of 1141 Pennsylvania Ave. They sought an addition to their twin unit, which would block access to a detached garage, and construction of a pool in the backyard.

Architect Steven Fenwick said the lot size requirement in the zone was 5,000 square feet but the property was 6,250 square feet. He said the predominant lot size in the zone was a width of 40 feet, so the applicant's property was 25 percent larger than most of the properties.

Fenwick said the application met all setbacks, lot

width, lot frontage, rear and side yard setbacks, height, lot coverage, floor area and lot usage ratios and parking requirements.

Gelzunas said since the detached garage would no longer be used for a car, it would be an accessory building and used as a screened-in porch and storage area.

Fenwick said the lot met all requirements for installation of a swimming pool but pools are not permitted in the R4 zone.

"The concern is going to be, well, if you let these folks have a pool, then there's nothing to differentiate this property from every other properties in Village Greene and therefore, we'd have to give a variance to everyone," Gelzunas said. "But that's not a true statement."

The property is uniquely suitable for a pool, Fenwick said.

Zoning Board engineer Craig Hurless said the R4 zone is the only residential

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## West Cape residents continue to oppose affordable housing through Habitat for Humanity

By JACK FICHTER  
Cape May Star and Wave

WESTCAPE MAY — Residents living near proposed affordable housing continue to ask Borough Commission to construct the homes in a neighborhood other than their own.

The borough is under a court order to construct two affordable housing units by 2025. Under consideration, allowing Habitat for Humanity to build two single-family homes on Willow Avenue.

At a May 10 Borough Commission meeting, Affordable Housing Planner Susan Gruel said the borough created a Mt. Laurel subcommittee in 2021 to look at options to address a two-unit gap. The subcommittee publicized the option of creating accessory apartments, but no property owners showed an interest, she said.

Other municipalities have solved affordable

housing shortfalls by working with Habitat for Humanity which creates single family homes and duplexes, Gruel said. She said her office prepared a vacant land assessment for the borough.

A borough owned lot on Willow Avenue site was vacant and could be developed for two single family homes under the existing zoning, Gruel said.

At a May 24 meeting, Mayor Carol Sabo said the borough's COAH (Council on Affordable Housing) planner would attend Borough Commission's June 14 meeting to discuss the availability of any other sites in West Cape May for the affordable housing units.

She said questions would be answered about the appropriateness of the Willow Avenue site for affordable housing.

A number of residents

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## Unwavering faith, indomitable spirit set Johnson apart

### Family Promise executive director led service agency to new heights

Editor's note: Laurie Johnson, executive director of Family Promise of Cape May, passed away May 29 following a battle with cancer.

By THOMAS RANISZEWSKI  
Special to the Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — Memorializing Laurie Johnson in even the most comprehensive of written pieces will always fall short of conveying the far-reaching effect her life and work had on her community and those she encountered — much like the futility of trying to convey the magnificence of the Grand Canyon or the grandeur of the night sky by way of a grainy snapshot.

When invited to contribute this piece on Johnson and her prolific life, it was instantly clear to me that my friendship with her dictated a first-person narrative. It is my hope that others who knew her can be reminded of their own time with Johnson through this "snapshot" and hear their own voice through my words.

During her time as proprietor of Oma's Doll Shop in Cape May in the early 2000s, Johnson and I were nodding acquaintances, often seeing each other at community functions or exchanging a cordial hello at a fundraising event.

Former Chamber of Commerce President Bill Causey remembers the impact Johnson had on Cape May during her time serving on the board of directors and as vice president.

"In 2007, Laurie and I were influential in establishing Movies on the Beach, which remains one of our most popular summer events," Causey said. "She was an asset to every project we worked on. Our town has truly lost a friend."

Shortly before she closed the doll shop in 2011, Johnson was hired as director of Family Promise of Cape

May County, a position she held until her death May 29, 2023. At that time, I was writing for a local newspaper and was assigned to write a feature on Johnson, the nonprofit organization's ambitious new director.

The assignment piqued my curiosity as I was to finally learn the story of the cheerful and charismatic community leader whom I so often saw around town but had never properly met.

Unlike the countless subjects I had been assigned to interview through the years, my meeting with Johnson sparked a 12-year friendship that I would come to treasure above all others.

Within minutes of meeting her, she shared with me one of her life's most vulnerable moments. The moment that within one day led her to Family Promise, sealing and defining her legacy as a pillar and champion of the community.

She told of the night she pulled into her driveway, sat in her car feeling lost, confused and defeated about where life had taken her and in complete abandon, prayed aloud to God, "Show me what you want me to do!"

That pivotal moment in her life revealed to me what set Johnson apart from others on the chosen path of helping those in need — her faith. An unwavering faith and indomitable spirit that would forge ahead on behalf of those unable to. A faith and determination to alleviate the struggles and hardships of others.

Family advocate Kathleen O'Neill lauded Johnson's faith, persistence and unbridled enthusiasm in manifesting her vision for Family Promise that seemed desperately out of reach during the organization's early days in a makeshift office above a produce store in Rio Grande.

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