

# news & features

The \$30 million jump in construction estimates for three Richmond schools exposes more of a divide than money.

by Jason Roop

## Sticker Shock

**W**hen School Board member Jonathan Young first learned of the new price tag for three schools the district is building, he says he was amazed.

“The moment that I heard about a \$30 million increase in what we’re going to spend,” he recalls — “I said stop the press.”

The Richmond Free Press, more precisely, is how several members of the Richmond School Board discovered in March that construction estimates for one middle and two elementary schools had jumped from \$110 million to \$140 million.

The news didn’t come from a meeting, an email to members, a news release from the city or a memo from the city’s chief administrative officer. The cost breakdowns weren’t available on the city website.

The amounts also didn’t come from the Education Compact, a group organized by Mayor Levar Stoney to build collaboration on academic issues among the mayor, City Council and School Board.

Nor did the costs come from the Joint Construction Team — a committee of city and schools representatives charged with overseeing construction. Minutes from 22 meetings the committee has held since

July 5 include no construction estimates.

“All this information should have been out there a long time ago,” City Councilwoman Kristen Larson says. “If you’re a member of the public, the biggest avenue to get this information is through the newspaper.”

Which is why an increase of 27 percent in cost estimates for new schools came as such a surprise and set off a scramble last week.

Four School Board members — Young, Kenya Gibson, Patrick Sapini and Felicia Cosby — issued a joint letter to city procurement officials March 27 expressing concern about the new numbers and

seeking answers.

“Not throwing any shade,” City Councilman Michael Jones tweeted about the board members’ letter, “but what are y’all discussing in your meetings? This is not Council-Mayor form of government. The superintendent reports to and works for the School Board.”

“I like Mike a lot,” Young says, “and his observation is astute. It’s very astute.”

“I’m a little frustrated with our communication around these issues,” School Board member Scott Barlow says. “I think communication clearly needs to improve.”

The process wasn’t supposed to work this way.

Stoney championed an increase to the meals tax of 1.5 percent that City Council approved in February 2018. The goal was to increase a revenue stream to the city against which it could borrow \$150 million to build a few new schools.

Citing transparency and fiscal management — and to avoid previous problems with school construction — City Council passed a resolution May 29 seeking a five-year plan on what schools were going to build with the meals tax, quarterly updates and publicly available reports posted online.

“None of that has happened,” Larson says.

Plans got underway to build three of five new schools that the Richmond School Board deemed priorities. The city of Richmond issued a request for proposals in May to build George Mason and E.S.H. Green elementary schools and a middle school to replace Elkhardt-Thompson in May.

The most recent construction estimates were \$110 million from November 2017. They were put together by longtime Richmond Public Schools administrator and interim superintendent Tommy Kranz, who now serves as assistant superintendent for operations at the Montgomery County Public Schools.

Proposals were due in June for what the city referred to as an “aggressive timeline to complete construction” by the fall of 2020 — a tight turnaround that typically comes with higher costs.

The mayor held a groundbreaking at each of the three school sites Dec. 19.

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## Grilled Steak Sandwich (\$16.50)

*Can Can Brasserie*

Sometimes a favorite is an oldie, but a reliable goodie. We all know the best things about Can Can include the ambience: the white paper on the tables, the coffee service in the mornings, accompanied by towers of croissants on display, the wall of windows that open in the spring, and of course, the delightful service. The second best thing about Can Can is the grilled steak sandwich. It's been on the lunch menu for years, and remains my mouthwatering go-to for the occasional midday splurge.

The ciabatta is soft and fresh, with thinly sliced steak topped with caramelized onions, fontina cheese, arugula leaves and garlic butter. Can Can's frites remain exceptional, if not only for the fragrant smell swirling around the bistro at lunchtime. Pairs well with a carafe of mimosas.

— Nathalie Oates

SCOTT ELMQUIST

# Favorite Dishes of 2019

## The Swank Bank (\$36)

*L'Opossum*

L'Opossum is my corner restaurant, and I've learned that the secret to getting into this award-winning spot is to slide in after the first set of tables turn and wait for a seat at the bar. One Friday night, decompressing after a hard week, I zeroed in on the lobster mac and cheese. I needed carbs, buttery fat and a hug.

David Shannon's swanky take on this classic comfort dish wrapped me in the warmth of reassuring familiarity with just enough delightful newness. The tender little pasta shells are bathed in a white truffle Mornay cream, dotted with big chunks of butter-poached Maine lobster. Chard and al dente asparagus add color and a healthy-ish few bites.

When black truffles are in season, Shannon grates them over the dish, wearing a sparkly silver glove. This is \$36 of pure delight.

Tucked in at the cozy dark bar that night, savoring every rich bite, I felt cared for. I didn't get the hug, but my hard week still slid away, erased by a warm bowl of carbs and dazzle.

— Phaedra Hise



ASH DANIEL



## Mustard Gnocchi (\$24)

*Amuse Restaurant*

Amuse is a quiet spot that seems overlooked either because it's hidden on the third floor of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts or because of the limited hours of operation. But the 2011 Restaurant of the Year is still killing it. Between champagne cocktails and curry fried oysters, there are some mainstays from the beginning, but this dish stood out on the winter menu.

It does what Amuse does best: It surprises guests with unexpected flavors and creative candor. Gnocchi is already a favorite of mine, and when it is not presented in a puddle of mediocre marinara, you can better enjoy the bronze sear on the pasta and the nutty mustard depth of the flavor. I also love a pesto, and the arugula variety was pleasantly more subdued than your usual, brighter basil. Tender slices of roasted mushrooms and Brussels sprouts are tossed in, making the serving hearty and distinctive. The entree also gives vegetarians the opportunity to order something decidedly not boring. — *Nathalie Oates*



## Eggnog Cheesecake (\$3.75 a slice; \$30 whole)

*WPA Bakery*

The holidays are long gone, but I'm still thinking about this one slice of WPA's eggnog cheesecake I enjoyed on a snowy December day at the bakery's South Side location. The bakers who dreamt this creation into reality knew the world needed a dessert that would make sugar plum fairies dance their magical hearts out. I'm writing this, thankfully, just in time to start considering what Lenten promises I might make and eventually break this year.

The eggnog cheesecake is a decadent, if seasonal, indulgence. The crust is a tasty melding of gingersnap and graham cracker with accents of molasses. Eggnog, gently spiced with nutmeg, replaces the heavy whipping cream to create the smooth consistency of the cheesecake. The slices are topped with an airy layer of nutmeg-infused whipped cream and a wedge of a sugar-crusting gingerbread cookie. It's better than any of the seasonal beverages at that green mermaid's coffee joint. And it pairs exceedingly well with WPA's hot chocolate and homemade marshmallows on a cold and snowy day. It almost makes you want more bleak, wintry days. Almost. — *Paul Brockwell*



## Swordfish Tartare (\$10)

*Alewife*

For our first Alewife experience, my dining companion and I opted for a smattering of starters and small plates in lieu of entrees. To say we weren't disappointed would be a vast understatement, and we still rave about nearly everything on the list, including our mocktails in observance of Dry January, which had such depth of flavor we forgot they were missing the booze.

While there's nothing on this menu I wouldn't recommend — hello, soft-serve affogato — it's the swordfish tartare that stole my heart. Seaweed aioli binds the bite-sized pieces of sushi-grade raw swordfish into a mound on the plate, and when I had it, it was topped with pickled ramps, black garlic and a few microgreens. It's fresh, complex and ever-so-slightly sweet, and while I'd happily eat it off a spoon, the accompanying slices of baguette, grilled to perfection, round it out beautifully.

The constantly rotating selection at Alewife depends heavily on what's seasonally available, so I'm deeply sorry to report that this particular swordfish tartare may not always be on the menu. The good news is, chef and owner Lee Gregory says you can usually count on finding some kind of tartare in a similar vein. Whew. — *Laura Ingles*

**Richmond biker Brantley Tyndall will line up alongside 85 other contenders in Astoria, Oregon, for the Trans Am Bike Race to Yorktown, arguably the most ambitious of its kind in the world. Rule No. 1 is you can't receive any support.**





# ROAD MEDITATION

**A Richmonder prepares for a grueling and dangerous 4,200-mile bike race across the country while hoping to raise awareness for bike safety at home.** by David Streever

**B**

efore he became an ultraendurance athlete, Brantley Tyndall's first passion was playing the guitar. He'd play for six hours at a go, just focused on the sound.

"I was kind of a couch potato," he says, laughing as he talks about how far he's come since he bought his first bike in 2008.

Tyndall still spends hours and hours sitting, but now it's on a bike saddle, chasing increasingly fantastical long-distance cycling goals. His next challenge, the Trans Am Bike Race, may be the most ambitious event of its kind in the world, and it'll be his first ultradistance race. On June 2, Tyndall will line up alongside 85 other contenders for a self-supported race across the nation, starting in Astoria, Oregon. After the riders depart, the clock won't stop until they cross the finish line in Yorktown, some 4,200 miles away.

If Tyndall can ride at the pace he's planned, he'll spend 18 or 17 days crossing the nation. He'll sleep in ditches, he'll eat in gas stations and above all, he'll ride his bike nearly all day, every day.

Or as he says: "Ride and sleep, but probably not a lot of sleep." Tyndall, who has an impressively diverse set of cultural references, compares the towns that dot the race route with Radiator Springs, the fictitious setting of Pixar's "Cars."

"I call it a tour of America's forgotten gas stations," he says, describing it as "the hardest summer vacation slash road trip ever."

It's an unusual event, especially in comparison to traditional bike racing with its team structure and byzantine rules. The Trans Am eschews all of that, focusing on the purity of a solo effort and a simple set of rules.

"Rule No. 1 is you can't receive any support," Tyndall says, before correcting himself. "Actually, rule No. 1 is you can't complain about the rules."

From that core maxim, the various rules serve to clarify that solo means solo. Outside of emergencies, riders can accept no help. They must buy their own food, carry their own gear and race under their own power. There is no prize money. There are no checkpoints. According to the official website, it's a "do-it-yourself challenge based on the purest of wagers: the gentleperson's bet or agreement. Nothing to win or lose but honor."

photos by Scott Elmquist