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Covering Prince William County and surrounding communities, including Gainesville, Haymarket, Dumfries, Occoquan, Quantico and the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park.



Elizabeth Fuentes and Cesar Rubio, both seniors at Potomac Senior High School kick it in their perfectly matched pastel pink and black ensembles during their school's May 7 prom at the Edward L. Kelly Building in Manassas. PHOTO BY DOUG STROUD

'We're just here to have fun'

Local high schools bring back prom after 2 long years

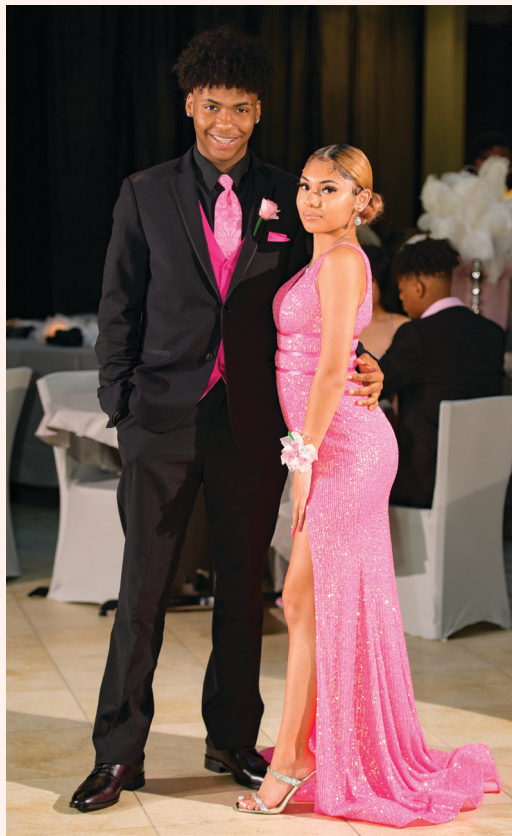
By Jill Palermo
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The girls donned long sparkly dresses and the highest of heels, while the boys wore traditional suits and tuxedos mixed with a few brightly colored jackets, some paired with ties and others with open collars and gold chains. Whatever their outfits, Potomac Senior High School juniors and seniors arrived at prom with a common goal: to have fun with their friends like normal teenagers.

"It feels like we're back to a new normal -- like how it should be for kids our age," said Keyana Stewart-Lamprey, one of about 400 students who attended the May 7 event. "To celebrate and be together in a safe environment."

Over the last several weekends, Prince William County's 13 high schools have been making up for lost time when it comes to proms -- with fancy dances stretching from the Sweeney Barn and the Hylton Performing Arts Center in Manassas to the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle.

See **PROM**, page 4



Tavarras Thomas and his girlfriend Alyssa Vasquez at Potomac Senior High School's prom.

On data centers: How much is enough?

Data show PWC is on track to overtake Loudoun in data center development

By Peter Cary
PIEDMONT JOURNALISM FOUNDATION

As debate rages over a plan to open 2,100 acres of rural land in the northern end of Prince William to a huge new data center industrial park called the Prince William Digital Gateway, much of it hinges on the claim that the county is running out of land for data center use.

Much of that conclusion hinges on how much land has been or can be developed inside the county's "Data Center Opportunity Zone Overlay District," an irregular blob of properties mostly in the county's center that offers access to the electric power, fiber-optic cable and other utilities and allows data center construction by-right. Not to be ignored, however, is the question of how much data center development is also underway outside the overlay district. Now, a new county report sheds light on those questions, suggesting that there is more data center space likely to be developed in Prince William County than was supposed.

See **DATA CENTERS**, page 6

Manassas City OKs \$271.6M new budget

Homeowners to pay about \$234 more in 2023

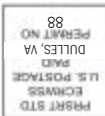
By Cher Muzyk
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The Manassas City Council passed a \$271.6 million budget for fiscal year 2023 on Tuesday that will result in an average \$234 increase in real estate tax bills for city homeowners next year.

The council reduced the existing real estate tax rate by 8.7 cents from \$1.222 to \$1.135 per \$100 in assessed value and kept the city's personal property and fire and rescue tax rates unchanged. The combined real estate tax and fire and rescue levy total \$1.342 per \$100 in assessed value. The tax bill increase is the result of rising property values.

The budget includes 5% raises for both city staff and teachers and staff at Manassas City schools.

See **BUDGET**, page 2



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Lifestyles: Native plant sales ring in spring, page 13



Forest Park High School students hold Suicide Awareness Walk, page 16



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Left: Potomac Senior H.S. students at prom, from left: Daron Petties, Trenton Richards, Barimah Sapping, Kwadwo Boateng, Joseph Henry and Khalin Green. **Right:** From left: Alana Richards, Isis Wallace, Ciara Benitoe, Kiara Wright, Keyana Stewart-Lamptey, Juliet Brown and Asia Blanchard pose for a picture upon arriving at their 2022 prom at the Edward L. Kelly building on Saturday, May 7.



PHOTOS BY DOUG STROUD

‘We’re just here to have fun’

PROM, from page 1

The proms began in late April and will continue through this coming weekend.

Potomac was the only high school to hold its prom at the school division’s Edward L. Kelly Administration Building outside Manassas this year. The building houses the school division’s administrative staff during the work week but has opened its soaring atrium for prom since it opened in the early 2000s.

Having prom at the Kelly building is a bit more work, but Potomac High Senior High School prom coordinator Ashley Catlett, a ninth-grade English teacher, said they made it happen with help from a professional decorator and caterer and support from the school’s PTO – along with lots of work by student organizers and staff sponsors.

Students arrived Saturday night to find the atrium swathed in black draping that surrounded a large dance floor circled with tables decorated with giant, white feather centerpieces. There were photo booths with sparkly backdrops and a 360-degree video station with a looping camera that proved to be a hit. The theme was “Midnight Masquerade.”

It was all the result of months of planning and fundraising by students who met daily in recent weeks to iron out every detail, said junior class president Kirsten Amemastro.

“It’s really a privilege to be able to do this again,” she said. “We wanted to make it really special for our seniors because they missed so much.”

The COVID-19 pandemic canceled high school proms in 2020 and forced them to be held in abbreviated forms in 2021. Last year, most schools set up red carpets and some decorations inside their buildings and invited groups of students to sign up for time slots to take pictures and hang out. Many then went to restaurants for dinner. It was an effort to provide an opportunity for students to get dressed up for a night out while still maintaining COVID protocols.

Because schools were back to normal this spring, they were free to return to traditional proms, although the pandemic was still a factor. Potomac Senior High School Principal Brandon Boles said COVID was weighing on his mind “quite a bit” as students danced and snapped pictures – mostly maskless – during their prom at the Kelly Building.

Still, Boles said the space is larger -- and the students more spread out -- than they typically would be in their hallways at school.

“This is the reality of our community right now,” Boles said, noting that the school has been following all the necessary protocols, such as allowing kids to wear masks if they want to and promoting getting vaccinated against COVID-19.

“But we also want to make sure our students and their families have some sense of normalcy, so we’re doing the best we can.”

While a few students did wear masks or face coverings of some sort to prom, most did not and said they were trying not to be too worried about COVID-19. Cases in Prince William County schools have been rising steadily over the past few weeks as the region copes with another surge driven by strains of the Omicron variant.

“I feel we’re not too worried because most of our students have been vaccinated,” Amemastro said.

“We’re just grateful we don’t have to worry about COVID,” added Stewart-Lamptey. “We’re just here to have fun.”

Reach Jill Palermo at jpalermo@fauquier.com. Anya Sczerzenie contributed to this report.

Del. Danica Roem announces bid for the state Senate

ROEM, from page 3

Still fixing Route 28

Back in 2017, Roem’s campaign slogan was “Fix 28 and Innovate.” Roem said she would continue to focus on Va. 28 by working to win the \$58 million in funding needed to implement five “R-cut” intersections and other improvements identified in a “STARS” study of the Va. 28 corridor. (STARS stands for “strategically targeted affordable roadway solutions”).

But Roem remains opposed to the much more expensive \$300 million Va. 28 bypass. Roem has twice voted against the bypass as a member of the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority and says she opposes the project both because it will require the taking of residents’ homes and because the road is proposed along an environmentally sensitive floodplain.

Roem said she wants to work with the Virginia Department of Transportation to replace three dangerous intersections in Gainesville along Rollins Ford Road – at Braided Stream, Estate Manor and Yellow Hammer drives – with roundabouts, which she

said would be safer for residents.

More broadly, Roem says she hopes to expand the Virginia Railway Express schedule to include more evening and weekend trips and wants to see regional transportation entities collaborate to create a new commuter bus route from Manassas to Dulles International Airport with stops in Chantilly, Reston, Herndon and Sterling along the way.

“The fact of the matter is, tens of thousands of my constituents go to Chantilly, Reston, Herndon and Sterling every single day,” she said. “We have to look outside the beltway for mass transit service, if for no other reason than to get more traffic off of I-66 and Va. 28 each day.”

Data centers, the Bi-County Parkway

Roem also remains opposed to the Bi-County Parkway in all its form; supports Prince William County’s “rural crescent” development restrictions and says she’s opposed to opening the rural area to data centers.

“I oppose data centers existing in Gainesville and Haymarket,” Roem said. “I know it’s a local land-use

issue, but the state deals with roads and the state deals with transmission lines ... and I don’t want to see any more transmission lines going up in Gainesville or Haymarket.”

Roem notes that Dominion has “in no way signed off” on new data centers tapping into existing transmission lines for power.

“We know they do not have the existing infrastructure to support the amount of data centers they want,” she added. “My constituents are absolutely tired of dealing with the Bi-County Parkway and the transmission lines. We know that data centers don’t help either of those things.”

So far, Roem is the only Democrat to announce a run for the seat. Ian Lovejoy, a former Manassas city councilman, announced on March 17 his intent to seek the GOP nomination. In his announcement, Lovejoy, 40, called the state Senate, led 21-19 by Democrats, “broken” and said he would focus on “lowering taxes, improving public safety, empowering parents and supporting teachers” if elected.

Lovejoy owns Reliant Hiring Solu-

tions, a firm that facilitates job fairs, and briefly owned Treasure Quest Adventures, which conducted outdoor puzzle- and trivia-question-based scavenger hunts featuring \$10,000 prizes.

In a March interview, Lovejoy said he would focus on improving transportation in Northern Virginia by encouraging teleworking as much as possible and would be a voice for pro-life values in the state Senate.

Roem said she supports reproductive freedom and would support any move to codify abortion rights in Virginia if the Supreme Court strikes down Roe v. Wade in June. The move is expected following the May 2 leak of the court’s draft majority opinion, which argues that the U.S. Constitution does not speak to abortion rights.

“As a trans woman, if you gut reproductive freedom for some people, it is a very short link to gutting reproduction rights for other people,” Roem said. “If I don’t want the government ... interfering with the autonomy of my body, I don’t want it to happen for other people.”

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