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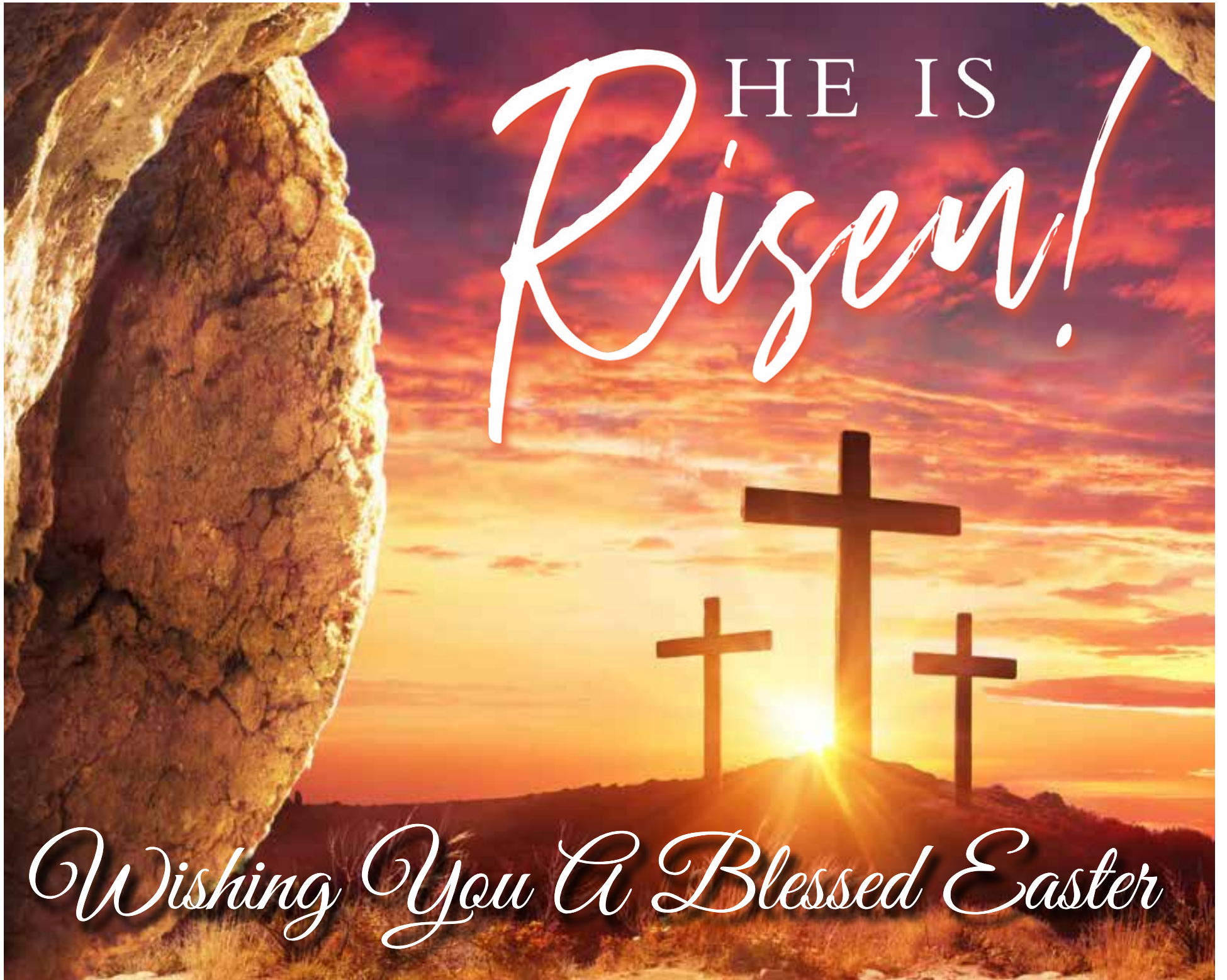


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April 1, 2026

HAPPY EASTER

Vol. 53, No. 34



## Gallery 23 Honors Founding Member Jan Swift with April Retrospective Exhibition

Gallery 23 proudly presents a month-long retrospective honoring founding member and acclaimed watercolorist Jan Swift, on view April 1-30 at the gallery, located at 23 Main Street in Blairstown, NJ.

A public reception celebrating Swift's artistic legacy will be held on Saturday, April 11 from 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM. The event is free and open to the public. The artist will be in attendance.



Jan Swift is a renowned watercolorist known for her expressive landscapes, architectural scenes, still lifes, and florals. Her work reflects a lifelong passion for observation, color, and

the dynamic interplay of line, shape, and texture. Swift once shared, "I just love to paint anything and everything. Watercolor is so exciting, especially when 'happenings' involving line, color, shape, space and texture occur. I don't like to get locked into any one thing."

A resident of Blairstown, Swift earned a Bachelor of Science in Art Education from Moore College of Art in Philadelphia and a Master's Degree in Education from Temple University and Tyler School of Fine Arts. Over a distinguished 25-year career, she taught art in New Jersey public schools and supervised art programs for 11

**Jan Swift: Art in Bloom**  
A lifetime retrospective

Reception - Saturday April 11 • 1:00-4:00pm  
Show Dates - 4/01 thru 4/30 2026

10% discount in April on any painting over \$100 (limit, one per person)  
23 Main Street, Blairstown, New Jersey  
Gallery Hours: Tues.-Sat. 10-5 • 908-362-6865 • [www.Gallery23.net](http://www.Gallery23.net)

elementary schools in Bucks County,

Pennsylvania.

Swift is the recipient of the Governor's Award for Excellence in Teaching and has published articles in Arts and Activities, a leading art education magazine. She is a member of Pocono Arts and has earned First Place in watercolor for three consecutive years. Her paintings are represented in private and corporate collections.

As a founding member of Gallery 23, Swift has played an integral role in shaping the gallery's artistic identity and community presence. This retrospective exhibition celebrates both her artistic achievements and her lasting contribution to

the cultural fabric of Blairstown.

The retrospective works on display represent a curated look back at Swift's artistic journey and will not be available for purchase. However, additional selected works by the artist will be available for sale throughout the month of April. In honor of the retrospective, Jan Swift will offer a 10% discount on one item priced over \$100 (limit one item per person) available for purchase during April.

Gallery 23 is located at 23 Main Street in Blairstown, NJ. For more information, visit [www.gallery23.net](http://www.gallery23.net), email [info@gallery23.net](mailto:info@gallery23.net), or call 908-362-6865.

# Blairstown Hose Company #1 Annual Easter Egg Hunt



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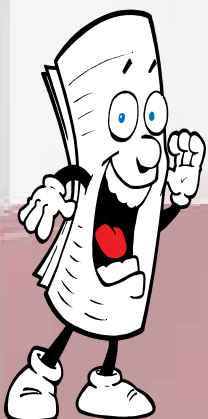
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## Parents Invited to Give Input on Needs and Services

Local parents are invited to offer input about their families' needs, challenges, and concerns, as well as suggestions for upcoming events, at a meeting of the Journey Family Success Center Parent Advisory Board at Project Self-Sufficiency, Tuesday, April 14th, 5:00 p.m. Family Success Center staff will highlight ways the agency can address issues facing local parents and incorporate feedback into future programs. Dinner and childcare will be provided for those in attendance. The gathering will also be available on Zoom; interested participants are invited to call 973-940-3500 to obtain log-in details. Those who attend their first meeting of the Journey Family Success Center Parent Advisory Board will be eligible to

receive a gift card. Advance registration for the in-person session is required. "Input from parents is crucial to the success of the Family Success Center and we are excited about offering residents the opportunity to meet

area providers, express their concerns about gaps in services, and identify strategies for moving forward," remarked Deborah Berry-Toon, Executive Director of Project Self-Sufficiency. "The Family Success Center has supported Sussex

County parents and children for many years, and we are looking forward to responding to the needs of area families and incorporating their suggestions into existing and new programs for the community."

Project Self-Sufficiency is located at 127 Mill Street in Newton. For information about the Parent Advisory Board, or to find out more about

any of the programs sponsored by the Journey Family Success Center at Project Self-Sufficiency, call 973-940-3500 or visit [www.journeyfsc.org](http://www.journeyfsc.org).

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## New to the Bangor Public Library

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*Daughter of Egypt: A Novel by Marie Benedict; And Now, Back to You by B. K. Borison; The Highway by C. J. Box; Mother of Death and Dawn by Carissa Broadbent; Bloodlust by Sandra Brown; You Resurrectionist by A. Rae Dunlap; The Golden Boy by Patricia Finn; The Dark Lord's Guide to Dating (And Other War Crimes) by Tiffany Hunt; The Night We Met by Abby Jimenez; Love Song: A Novel by Elle Kenney; Wolf Worm by T. Kingfisher; Once and Again: A Novel by Rebecca Serle; Nonesuch: A Novel by Francis Spufford; Everyone in the Bank is a Thief by Benjamin Stevenson; Served Him Right by Lisa Unger; Beautiful Broken Love by Shanora Williams; Mayhem and the Mortal by Shanora Williams; The Road of Bones by Demi Winters; The Violin Maker's Secret by Evie Woods; Hooked: A Novel of Obsession by Azako Yuzuki*

**Adult Non Fiction:**  
*The Best Dog in the World: Essays on Love; Getting Naked: The Quiet Work of Becoming Perfectly Imperfect by Valerie Bertinelli; Judy Blume: A Life by Mark Oppenheimer; A Hymn to Life: Shame Has to Change Sides by Gisele Pelicot*

**Easy Fiction:**  
*The Littlest Yak: Home is Where the Herd Is by Lu Fraser; Dr. Seuss's Spring Things by Dr. Seuss*

**Junior Fiction:**  
*Junie B., First Grader Aloha-Ha-Ha! By Barbara Park; Ron Weasley by J. K. Rowling; Hermione Granger by J. K. Rowling; Break-out by Christina Wyman*

**Young Adult Fiction:**  
*The Ruins Beneath Us by Sasha E. Sloan*

**Young Adult Non Fiction:**  
*Bonnie and Clyde: The Making of a Legend by Karen Blumenthal; The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion & the Fall of Imperial Russia by Candace Fleming; Death in the Jungle: Murder, Betrayal, and the Lost Dream of Jonestown by Candace Fleming; Rolling Warrior: The Incredible, Sometimes Awkward, True Story of a Rebel Girl on Wheels Who Helped Spark of Revolution by Judith E. Heumann*

**DVDs:**  
*Hamnet; Sinners; Sing Song Blue*

## New to the Blue Mountain Community Library

**Blue Mountain Community Library News for Early April:**  
The library is located at 216 S. Robinson Ave. in Pen Argyl. Open hours are Monday-Saturday 10am-12pm and Monday and Thursday 6-8pm. Questions? Call 610-863-3029 or email [info@bmcl.org](mailto:info@bmcl.org).

April is Volunteer Appreciation Month. A huge thank you to the library's dedicated volunteers. The library is in need of more adult volunteers for all shifts. This is a great opportunity to serve the community and meet like-minded individuals! Commitment involves just 4.5 hours each month. No special skills are required. All training is provided. Pick up an application at the circulation desk.

**The library is closed April 2 (evening), April 3, and April 4 for Easter.**

Stop in today to see our new mascot: a beautiful little blue fish! Thank you to Waters Edge Aquarium for donating him and to an anonymous donor for donating his bowl, food, and supplies. Through April 18, anyone can suggest a name for the fish. Then through April 30, everyone can vote for a name. Try the new scavenger hunt for children, with lots of new prizes in the prize basket - plus a scavenger hunt for adults and young adults! Deadline is April 30, with a prize drawn from all correct entries. Book group for adults is April 14 at 6:30pm, discussing *The God of the Woods*. Register by emailing [info@bmcl.org](mailto:info@bmcl.org). A silent auction will be held from April 10 through May 6. We have many great Mother's Day gifts. Library membership is not required to bid.

**New to the circulating collection:**

**Adult fiction:**  
*The Astral Library (Kate Quinn); Cold Zero (Brad Thor); The Crossroads (C.J. Box); More than Enough (Anna Quindlen); The Viper (Brad Meltzer); Cleopatra (Saara El-Arifi); The Castaways (Lucy Clarke); The Devil's Bible (Steve Berry); A Mother's Love (Danielle Steel); The Girls We Sent Away (Meagan Church); How to Read a Book (Monica Wood); The Life Cycle of the Common Octopus (Emma Knight); When I Kill You (B.A. Paris); If Two Are Dead (Rick Mofina); A Dead Draw (Robert Dugoni); The Right to Remain (James Grippando)*

**Adult nonfiction:**  
*The Let Them Theory (Mel Robbins); Black Dahlia (William J. Mann); The Other Family Doctor (Karen Fine)*

**Large print fiction:**  
*Nightcaps at the Beach House Hotel (Judith Keim); New Beginnings in Lavender Bay (Michele Brouder)*

**Young Adult Fiction:**  
*Beth Is Dead (Katie Bernet); A Tribute of Fire (Sariah Wilson); A Vow of Embers (Sariah Wilson); A Curse of Ashes (Sariah Wilson)*

**Juvenile fiction:**  
*The New Class (Swapna Reddy); Sparkling Steps (Sue Bentley); Pete at the Beach (James Dean); A Bear, a Man, and a Donut Van (Daniel Berntstrom); Fox and the Mystery Letter (Alex G. Griffiths)*

**Juvenile nonfiction:**  
*Who Was Nellie Bly? (Margaret Gurevich); What Was the Hindenburg? (Janet B. Pascal); Minecraft Construction Handbook (Matthew Needler); Minecraft Combat Handbook (Stephanie Milton); Who Was Ruth Bader Ginsburg? (Patricia Brennan Demuth); Who Is Malala Yousafzai? (Dinah Brown); The Wonder of Easter (Matt Mitter)*

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## Brown, Lawmakers Push Protective Pet Cremation Legislation

In Harrisburg this week, I joined my fellow colleagues Senator Camera Bartolotta, Senator Nick Pisciotto and Senator Lisa Boscola to speak on Senate Bill 950 and the importance of protecting our pets.

The legislation, Senate Bill 950, would establish standards, increase oversight, and ensure transparency in the pet cremation industry, providing critical protections for families during times of loss. This bill aims to address an urgent need to establish regulatory oversight for third-party providers in the pet cremation industry.

This legislation works to protect the welfare of animals, support pet owners, and maintain public trust. Pets are part of our families, and they deserve to be treated with dignity, both in life and after they pass. The mishandling of pet



remains is unacceptable, and it is time we establish clear standards so families can have confidence in the services they rely on. I appreciate the strong bipartisan support for this effort and look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues, stakeholders, and Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General Sunday

to move this important issue forward! As Co-Chair of the Animal Protection Caucus, this bill is near and dear to my heart, hopefully providing protection to our loving pets for their final days. I look forward to this important legislation continuing on the path to be signed into law.

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### Commissioners Approve Budget With Tax Rate Decrease

Warren County's equalized tax rate will once again drop under a \$119.4 million budget approved by the Board of County Commissioners, marking the sixth year in a row with a rate decrease.

Despite facing major increases in health insurance costs and putting more money toward education and public safety, the 2026 spending plan the Commissioners unanimously approved cuts the tax rate and includes no debt service – the County made its last debt payment in the summer of 2025 – as it fully funds a capital projects budget of \$13.3 million.

The equalized tax rate, which was 62.9 cents per \$100 of property in 2020, is now below 50 cents, dropping to 49.4 cents from 50.2 cents last year.

All three commissioners credited the hard work of County government staff in delivering a budget with no tax increases, despite what Commissioner Director Lori Ciesla described as a "chaotic" financial picture on the state level. "We have to keep swimming upstream" in the face of rising energy and health care costs, Ciesla said, but the County is budgeting wisely and trying to be practical.

"We keep doing things that we need to do," Ciesla remarked.

Commissioner Jason

J. Sarnoski said that while this year's budget was challenge, there are more hurdles ahead. "In the next few years we're going to be seeing more challenging budgets as the economy continues to fluctuate" with rising costs of energy, housing, and everything else, he said. "The taxpayers are the ones paying the bill," Sarnoski added, and the County works hard to keep that in mind.

"A lot is being asked of county government and this board is delivering," Commissioner James R. Kern III said, noting that the County not only faces the same headwinds as its resident from rising costs, but "the role of what county government is asked to do" is changing.

The budget reflects those changes, with increases for the Public Safety Department, the Prosecutor's Office and the Sheriff's Office. The budget includes \$2.1 million in capital spending on the county 911 emergency communications system, and Kern noted the County has to subsidize the improvement because the State has not supplied money from what is supposed to be a dedicated fund financed by a fee on telephone service.

Meanwhile, the County will increase the Open Space Tax by 1 cent per \$100 this year. Although taxpayers have authorized an

Open Space Tax of up to 6 cents, it has remained at 2 cents for the last five years. The Commissioners cited the cost to purchase land is increasing, and county residents have been supportive of their tax funds going to support farm and open space preservation to prevent overdevelopment.

The \$13.3 million Capital Ordinance the Commissioners approved includes:

- \$3.8 million for road resurfacing, with \$831,932 coming from county taxes and the rest from a State grant

- \$2.56 million for road and drainage projects, such as guiderail replacement and road and intersection design and construction.

- \$675,000 for bridge and culvert improvements.
- \$2.1 million to continue a program to improve 911 emergency communications through Warren County to eliminate "dead spots".

- \$1.23 million for special vehicles and heavy equipment, including a vehicle for the Senior & Disabled Transportation Program, as well as dump trucks and other public works equipment.

The Commissioners also adopted the 2026 County Library budget of \$5.79 million, which carries the same tax levy as the past three years, resulting in a slight decrease in the tax rate.



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# BANGOR (8) VS PALMERTON (9) SOFTBALL



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# PA House Republicans Launch 'Freedom Through Affordability' Initiative to Cut Costs for Families

With Pennsylvanians facing rising costs on everyday essentials, House Republican policymakers today launched their "Freedom Through Affordability" initiative—a plan to deliver tax relief and lower costs to make Pennsylvania a more affordable place to live, work, and raise a family.

The initiative, unveiled at a Capitol press conference, includes a package of six-month tax cuts and sales tax holidays, a multi-billion-dollar relief effort, aimed at providing immediate relief to families and workers struggling under the weight of higher prices.

Framing the effort, Rep. David Rowe (R-Snyder/Union/Mifflin/Juniata), chairman of the House Republican Policy Committee, emphasized the direct connection between affordability and opportunity.

"Our goal is simple: Make Pennsylvania a place where families

can afford to live, work and build their future. When people can keep more of what they earn and the cost of everyday life is within reach, they have the freedom to make their own choices about their future. That's what this effort is about — achieving freedom through affordability for people across the Commonwealth," said Rowe.

At the center of the initiative are targeted proposals designed to provide immediate relief on some of the most pressing household expenses, including the suspension of key taxes for six months, directly reducing costs on essential services and daily expenses.

Rowe is sponsoring legislation to reduce the state Personal Income Tax rate from 3.07% to 2.99% for six months.

Reps. Kristin Marcell (R-Bucks), vice chair of the House Republican Policy Committee, and Eric Davanzo

(R-Westmoreland) are co-sponsoring legislation to suspend the Gross Receipts Tax on electricity and telecommunications for six months.

Highlighting the impact on everyday families, Marcell pointed to the growing pressure households are facing.

"Everywhere I go in my community, people are looking for a break from rising costs, especially on the basics of life," said Marcell. "This temporary tax holiday is a commonsense way to give them that break, save them some money and help make life just a little easier."

Davanzo underscored how energy costs ripple throughout the broader economy.

"The message from Pennsylvanians has never been louder or more clear: Energy costs are making their day-to-day unaffordable. Right here and now, we can give families a little bit of breathing room and help them stretch their budgets

a little bit further," Davanzo said. "Because energy costs factor into production, wholesale and retail costs on everyday products, this relief will be felt across the Commonwealth's entire economy."

Focusing on transportation, Rep. Abby Major (R-Armstrong/Westmoreland) emphasized the burden of fuel costs on working families in introducing legislation to suspend the state's gas tax for six months.

"High fuel costs compound the financial strain Pennsylvanians already face due to inflation and ongoing cost-of-living increases," Major said. "My legislation will provide temporary relief to make it easier to balance a family's budget. I urge immediate action so there is more money in the pockets of our hardworking residents."

Affordability Starts Here Tour

In addition to advancing immediate relief, lawmakers stressed the importance of continuing to hear directly from residents across the Commonwealth.

Rep. Joe Hogan (R-Bucks), deputy chair of the Policy Committee, announced the launch of the "Affordability Starts Here" tour, which will bring lawmakers across the Commonwealth to hear directly from

families, workers and employers about what it takes to make life more affordable.

"As the Policy Committee's Deputy Chair on affordability, I know how important this 'Affordability Starts Here' Tour of Pennsylvania is for so many families," said Hogan. "Starting next week, we will make our first stop in Hanover for a hearing on how we can reduce the costs of child care and expand the tour to all sectors of our economy. Folks across our Commonwealth have great ideas and I'm looking forward to identifying and promoting more ways to make Pennsylvania more affordable for everyone."

Hogan, a new father, joins Rep. KC Tomlinson (R-Bucks) in co-sponsoring six-month sales tax holidays on car seats as well as newborn/baby products.

Additional members sponsoring affordability-related tax relief proposals include Reps. Mike Armanini (R-Clearfield/Elk), Stephanie Borowicz (R-Clinton/Union), Marla Brown (R-Lawrence), Jamie Flick (R-Lycoming/Union), Ann Flood (R-Northampton), Jonathan Fritz (R-Wayne/Susquehanna), Josh Kail (R-Beaver/Washington), Kate Klunk (R-York), Roman Kozak (R-Beaver), Thomas Kutz (R-Cumberland), Andrew Kuzma (R-Allegheny/Washington), Shelby

Labs (R-Bucks), Robert Leadbeter (R-Columbia), Zach Mako (R-Lehigh/Northampton), Natalie Mihalek (R-Allegheny/Washington), Brett Miller (R-Lancaster), Brenda Pugh (R-Luzerne), Brian Rasel (R-Westmoreland), Chad Reichard (R-Franklin), Michael Stender (R-Northumberland/Montour) and Parke Wentling (R-Mercer). Legislation is forthcoming.

Affordability Starts Here Tour schedule:

March 30, Hanover: Making Child Care Affordable for Pennsylvania Families  
April 7, Kingston: Reforming the Rain Tax to Make Pennsylvania More Affordable  
April 30, Sewickley: Making Child Care Affordable for Pennsylvania Families  
May 8, Bradford: Care Close to Home: Expanding Access to Labor and Delivery in Pennsylvania  
May 21, Reinholds: Making Housing More Affordable in Pennsylvania  
May 26, Hawley: Making Housing More Affordable in Pennsylvania  
May 27, Lebanon City: Making Housing More Affordable in Pennsylvania  
More dates to be announced!  
For more information, visit [policycommittee.com](http://policycommittee.com).

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# Active Bald Eagle Nests In New Jersey Experience Slight Decline, Likely Due To Avian Flu

The bald eagle population in New Jersey experienced a slight decline in active nests last year likely due to the impacts of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, according to the annual New Jersey Bald Eagle Project Report released recently.

The report, developed by NJDEP Fish & Wildlife with the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey, identified 251 nests that produced eggs in 2025, a five percent decrease from 2024, when a record 264 active nests were documented. Bald eagle flying.

"The Department of Environmental Protection's work to restore New Jersey's bald eagle population has been so remarkable that the species, once on the brink of extirpation in New Jersey, was removed from the state's endangered species list last year," said Acting DEP Commissioner Ed Potosnak. "This success, made possible with the

support of countless volunteers over the years, is proof that DEP can deliver against seemingly insurmountable odds. This slight decline in active nests reminds us that we must remain steadfast in our efforts to protect bald eagles for future generations to admire."

Since the beginning of the U.S. outbreak in January 2022, Highly Pathogenic Avian influenza (HPAI), also called avian influenza or bird flu, has impacted wild and domestic birds in every state. This winter, the wild bird species most impacted in New Jersey has been Canada geese. Outbreaks tend to be seasonal, declining as weather warms and flocks of impacted bird species migrate and disperse.

Impacts of HPAI on Wild Birds:

As birds of prey, bald eagles are susceptible to exposure to avian flu by the way they interact with affected bird species. The outbreak of HPAI in the winter of

2024-2025 resulted in large numbers of sick and dying waterfowl, especially snow geese and Canada geese that congregate on reservoirs, lakes and rivers that provide foraging habitat for eagles. Transmission occurs when eagles consume infected birds.

Testing confirmed that 28 of 56 bald eagle mortalities last year (for which testing was completed) were the result of HPAI, an unusually high 50 percent rate. Other causes included vehicle impacts, other trauma, and electrocution on power equipment.

"While there is little that conservation agencies can do to prevent the spread of avian influenza in wild bird populations, NJDEP Fish & Wildlife continues to monitor the situation closely and keep the public informed about its presence in wildlife and our communities," said NJDEP Fish & Wildlife Assistant Commissioner Dave Golden. "Because bald eagles are particularly susceptible

to HPAI transmission, it is vital that the public stay informed and help us protect these majestic birds from human-related threats."

The DEP encourages the public to report any threats to eagle nests, such as human disturbance or habitat destruction within 1,000 feet of the nest to the DEP at 877-WARNDEP.

A History of Recovery As of the early 1980s, New Jersey had just one remaining bald eagle nest, a pair in a remote part of Cumberland County. As across the nation, the state's bald eagle population had been devastated by widespread use of DDT and other threats, including habitat degradation and human disturbances.

Once used widely to control mosquitoes, DDT is a synthetic insecticide that had accumulated in fish that eagles eat, causing thin-shelled eggs that could not withstand incubation. The federal government banned DDT in 1972, marking a



pivotal step in the ultimate comeback of the species.

Recovery efforts in New Jersey began in the early 1980s, with reintroduction of eagles from Canada and artificial incubation and fostering efforts that started to pay discernible dividends throughout the 1990s.

Active nests surpassed 100 for the first time in decades by hitting 119 in 2012. Ten years later, the total had more than doubled to 250. In 2024, New Jersey boasted a record 293 nesting pairs of bald eagles, of which 264 laid eggs.

The federal government removed the bald eagle from its list of endangered species in 2007, reflecting

strong gains in the population throughout the nation. In January 2025, New Jersey changed the conservation status of the bald eagle from endangered to species of special concern, reflecting a determination that the species' survival in the state is no longer in jeopardy.

For more information about the New Jersey Bald Eagle Project, visit the DEP's website at <https://dep.nj.gov/njfw/wildlife/raptors-in-new-jersey/#eagle>.

The Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey provides information on its eagle program at <http://www.conservewildlifenj.org/protecting/projects/baldeagle/>.

## Slate Belt Heritage Center & Museum Holds Monthly Historic Program on Thursday, April 16th



The Slate Belt Heritage Center & Museum will hold their monthly historic program on Thursday, April 16th at 7pm. As The United States is in full swing of celebrating its "Semiquincentennial", come join speaker Melissa Hough as she presents "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness: What Would We Do?" What would we do if we lived during the War of Independence? When it was a major struggle to survive on what was the frontier, how did international events impact the lives of people in what we now call the Slate Belt? What sites and artifacts do we have that connect us to those times? Follow Melissa on a journey into the Slate Belt area's lifestyle in the mid-1700's and the big questions that confronted people at that time. Melissa is the Curator of the Heritage Center & Museum and possesses a wealth of knowledge on the Slate Belt. Featured in the Chamber Room will be the Center's 2026 exhibit: "Life, Liberty & the Pursuit of Happiness". The event is free and open to the public. The Center is located at 30 North 1st Street, Bangor, PA. For additional information please contact: Karen Brewer at 484-894-5661.

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### Garden Dilemmas? Ask Mary?



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Hello fellow readers,  
Thanks to those who reached out about our last chat on Early Spring Tending, where I shared how I've been "reconvening" with the leaves I didn't tend to in the fall—for good reason. Steven of Hope, NJ, asked how deep leaves

can be in garden beds. The rule of thumb is no more than 2 inches. And if they are huskier leaves, like oak, tulip tree, or sycamore, you may want to make that layer a little thinner. That way, the leaves won't mat and prevent water and air from reaching plant roots and the soil microbes below.

If you shred the leaves first by running over them a few times with a lawn mower, they can be up to four inches deep—and you'll be on your way to something even better: leaf mold.

Leaf mold is simply composted leaves with remarkable benefits. Over time, leaves break down into a rich, dark, earthy material packed with minerals. When added to the garden, it



improves soil structure, helps retain moisture, feeds earthworms and beneficial microbes, and suppresses weeds.

It's one of nature's most generous offerings—and entirely free.

You can make leaf mold by piling leaves and letting them decompose over one to three years. If shredded, the process can take as little as six to twelve months. Some gardeners speed things along by placing moistened leaves in perforated bags with a bit of soil. Applied as a mulch, about 2 to 3 inches deep, nutrients seep into the soil, nourishing roots.

The mulch you buy is a broader topic—and one that often raises questions.

Not all wood mulch is created equal. Dyed mulches are often made from recycled construction debris, which may contain pressure-treated wood. The dyes themselves are often petroleum-based and can be

harmful to plants as well.

There's also the issue of heat. Dark mulches absorb and radiate warmth, which can stress plants. I liken it to walking barefoot on a hot driveway in midsummer—not something we'd choose, and not something our plants would appreciate either.

Natural mulches, such as aged hemlock, are a better option. Properly aged mulch has had time to break down, making nutrients more accessible and reducing the risk of drawing nitrogen from the soil.

This leads to a thoughtful question from a client who is having an oak and a maple tree removed. Karen wondered whether the chipped wood could be used as mulch. The answer is yes—with a bit of patience.

Fresh wood chips can contain compounds that inhibit plant growth, a natural process known as allelopathy. While this may not harm estab-



lished plants, it's best to allow the chips to age for several months before using them in garden beds. Though fresh wood chips make wonderful garden paths.

Keep in mind that gardens don't always need to be re-mulched every year. As plantings fill in, they begin to function as a "living mulch," shading the soil and naturally helping retain moisture.

I adore layered gardens—a design technique that uses an assortment of plants of varying heights, shapes, and textures that overlap in complementary and contrasting colors. In a few years, they require no mulching at all.

In lawns, too, small adjustments can make a meaningful difference. Keeping grass at a height of three to four inches—closer to four is ideal—

supports pollinators, reduces water needs, and encourages stronger root systems. It also allows the tapestry of flowering lovelies—blue violets and clover in my "unconventional" lawn—to shine. Skipping pesticides and embracing practices like No-Mow May offer additional opportunities to support wildlife during a critical time.

Gardening, like nature, is not something we control, but something we participate in. The leaves we rake, the mulch we choose, and the way we tend the soil are all part of a larger cycle—one that reminds us, again and again, that nothing in nature is wasted.

Garden Dilemmas? AskMaryStone.com or tune in on your favorite Podcast app.

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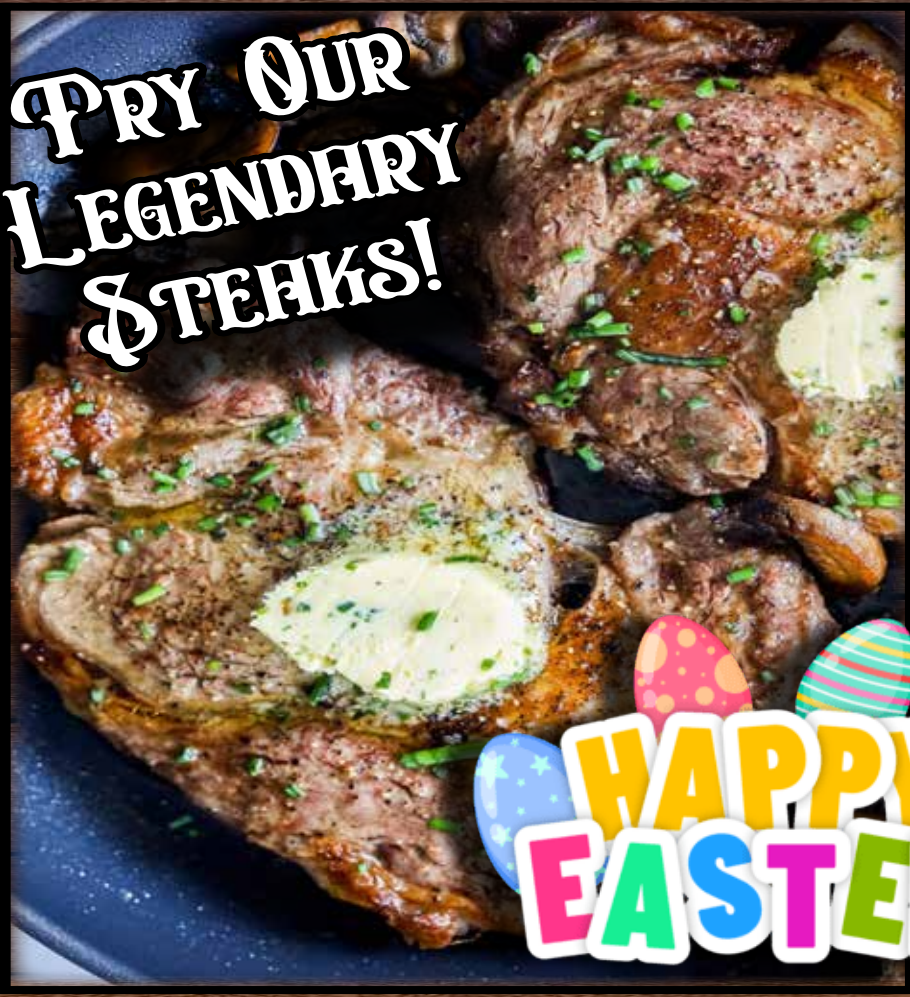
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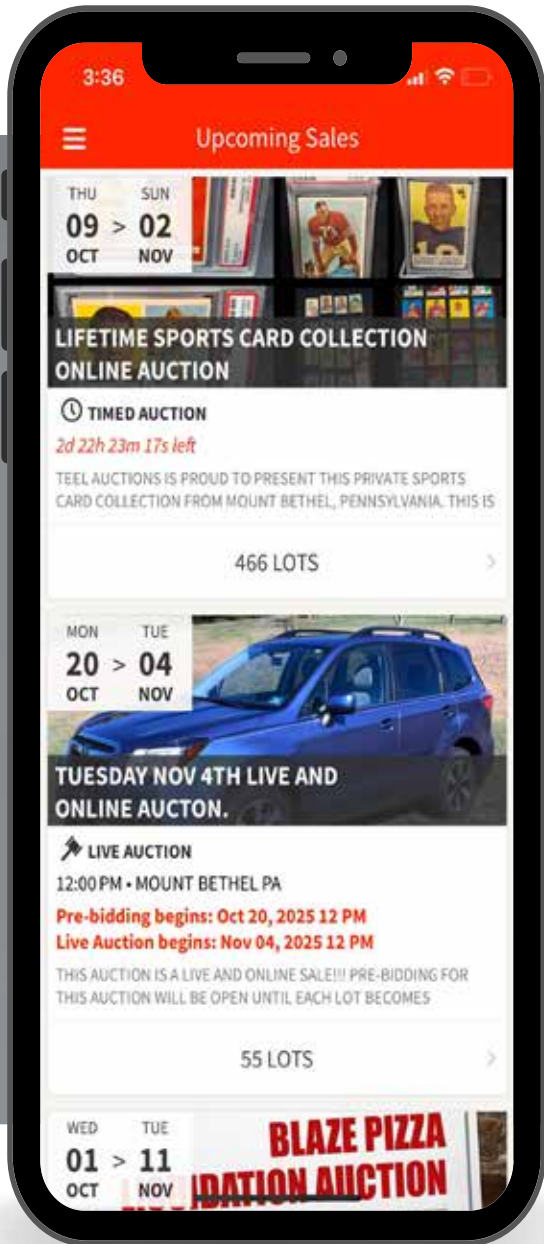
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**Clean Team Workforce Announces March Employee of the Month**

The Clean Team Workforce congratulates its Employee of the Month for March, Chris H.

Chris's early life was marked by challenges. His parents divorced when he was three years old. Chris and his brother lived with his mother in New Jersey. When Chris was in middle school, his mom was diagnosed with cancer, and she passed away when he was a freshman in high school. At 17 years old, he moved in with his father, who was a heavy drinker. He lived with his dad for 3 years and then, in need of change, relocated to California to live with his aunt. Shortly after, Chris's father



passed away. With no direction or stability, he moved from state to state every few years.

Most recently, Chris found his way to Pennsylvania. He worked as a line cook, but after being laid off, he depleted his savings to pay for rent and was eventually evicted. Then, a skateboarding accident left Chris unable to work.

That's when he came to the Allentown Rescue Mission for shelter and time to heal.

Entering the Emergency Shelter, Chris felt humbled yet welcomed at the same time. He joined the Mission's Transformation Program to gain stability and get back on his feet. "It helped remind me of my roots in spirituality as well as reaffirming my confidence in my abilities and talent," Chris stated.

After healing from his injuries and graduating from the Transformation Program, Chris joined the Clean Team Workforce. He immediately started working in the

Mission's kitchen as a cook. His years of culinary experience have been a blessing for the men residing at the Mission. Chris is trained to run many aspects of a commercial kitchen. In addition to making and serving balanced meals to nearly 100 men every day, he is gracious and respectful to donors who drop off food for the Mission.

Chris's goal is to become a chef. He would love to work at a high-end resort or possibly team up with his brother and open their own restaurant someday. "I love to cook, and it's a rewarding field to work in," Chris stated.

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