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To "Kay Petersen" <kaypetersen7@gmail.com>
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New from CommonWealth Beacon

HOMICIDES WAY DOWN: Boston has recorded only two homicides so far this year, a remarkably low number even for a city known for its low homicide rate. Michael Jonas reports that local officials are thrilled, but caution that the peaceful run may not continue at this pace.

MWRA EXPANSION: In their budget proposal, House leaders plan to endorse a market expansion by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority. It currently serves 61 communities, reports Colin Young of State House News Service.

OPINION: Almi Abeyta, superintendent of the Chelsea Public Schools, and Ed Lambert of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education say it's time to rethink the way we do high school.

Political Notebook: Mariano missiles | MCAS confusion | Brookline copycats

March 22, 2024

By **MICHAEL JONAS**, **GINTAUTAS DUMCIUS**, and **JENNIFER SMITH**

Mariano's blunt urinalysis of Steward

John Silber, the late Boston University president and the 1990 Democratic gubernatorial nominee, was known for his “Silber shockers,” which were blunt comments on a variety of topics.

Nowadays, we may be in an era of “Mariano missiles.” House Speaker Ron Mariano, a former schoolteacher from Quincy, can be similarly blunt, or teasing, in his remarks, as he was while speaking at the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce on Thursday.

Calling out members of his leadership team who were in the audience, he noted that a former Ways and Means chair Jeff Sanchez was allowed to sit at the table with them. “You can’t miss his dome,” Mariano said. Sanchez’s successor, Aaron Michlewitz, sat nearby. “Aaron and I converse daily,” Mariano continued. “Not always pleasantly. But daily.”

Later, when discussing his support for standardized testing, Mariano said it was based on when he lost his job as a teacher, but two of his colleagues across the hall, who were “borderline incompetent,” kept theirs. “I’ll say borderline because I’m being kind today,” he added.

But the biggest missile came afterwards when he was talking to reporters about the financially struggling Steward Health Care, the for-profit chain that’s been backed by private equity. Lawmakers plan to dig into how private equity has affected the health care sector at a [hearing Monday morning](#), and the list of people slated to testify include Healey administration officials, academics, and public health experts.

One name not on the list is that of Ralph de la Torre, the Steward CEO who has achieved notoriety for owning a \$40 million yacht while his health care system drowns in red ink. De la Torre was in charge of Steward when it bought, and then later shut down, Quincy Medical Center years ago, much to the dismay of the city’s leaders and residents.

Mariano was asked whether he had recently spoken to de la Torre, and his analysis of what the CEO has wrought was short and to the point: “Not since he pissed through my hospital,” Mariano said, as one of his aides quickly ended the scrum.

The Codcast

This week on The Codcast, longtime Massachusetts Nurses Association executive director **JULIE PINKHAM** talks to John McDonough and **PAUL HATTIS** about the MNA’s relationship to Steward Health Care over the years, the consequences of healthcare deregulation, and how the state can facilitate a positive outcome in the present situation.

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MCAS muddle

Ballot questions often ask voters to weigh in complicated issues that, in an ideal world, are better sorted out through the give and take of the more deliberative legislative process.

The brewing battle over MCAS is already proving the point.

The question that the state's largest teachers union is pushing toward the November ballot would remove the requirement that students pass the 10th grade MCAS exam to graduate from high school. But you wouldn't necessarily know that by listening to the state's top leaders.

Asked about the issue on Tuesday on WBUR, Gov. Maura Healey [said](#), "I think that assessment is important. We need to be able to assess how our young people are doing, so I do not support getting rid of MCAS." House Speaker Ron Mariano used identical language following a Thursday morning speech to business leaders, telling the Greater Boston Chamber's Jim Rooney he does not support "getting rid of MCAS."

Some may understand the pols' shorthand reference, but to others their replies could be confusing. The ballot question would not "get rid of MCAS" or the assessment of students using the standardized test. The state is required under federal law to test students in grades 3-8 and once in high school.

There are arguments for and against using MCAS as a high-stakes bar students must clear to receive a diploma – the issue that may go before voters. But it would be easy to fail a test asking exactly what the ballot question would do if you only had the two leaders' comments to go on.

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Ticking clock on tobacco?

The Supreme Judicial Court's decision to [uphold](#) a novel law in Brookline that would prevent anyone born after January 1, 2000, from buying tobacco or e-cigarettes is already being seen as a green light for other municipalities.

Brookline's approach represents a radical shift in discouraging tobacco use, but one that is fundamentally limited by its borders. It would be inconvenient, though possible, for a young adult barred from tobacco purchase in Brookline to pop over to a nearby community. But its largest neighbor may be mulling a policy change.

Asked about Brookline's phased-in tobacco ban a few days after the SJC decision, Mayor Michelle Wu noted on Boston Public Radio that bans on certain types of tobacco, like menthol cigarettes, can impact stores in certain communities differently if there was a strong preference for the product.

An age-based approach "can even the playing field," Wu told Jim Braude and Margery Eagan. "In the name of public health, I think it's something we all should be looking into."

Melrose, Stoneham, and Wakefield share a health director and have been considering a “nicotine-free generation” law that would prohibit sales of any tobacco or e-cigarette products to anyone born on or after January 1, 2004. Their boards of health held several meetings on the proposed bans, according to public records and health officials, but held off on a vote as the SJC suit was underway. Malden discussed the ruling on Wednesday and the three towns are likely to move on their proposed bans this spring.

More from Commonwealth Beacon

TUFTS TENURE DECISION: The Supreme Judicial Court rules against Tufts University, holding that tenure does guarantee some level of academic freedom and economic security. But Jennifer Smith reports the court leaves the question of how far that protection extends up to a lower court.

OPINION: Brian Kane, the executive director of the MBTA Advisory Board, says the commuter rail ridership recovery program is working and needs to be replicated on the bus and subway systems.

GOODBYE, POLITICAL PARTIES: Steve Koczela, president of the MassINC Polling Group, says Massachusetts political parties are withering away as policies and preferences steer voters into the unenrolled column.

In Other News

BEACON HILL

- The Healey administration has reached a new agreement with federal officials over the state-federal cost sharing in plans to replace the two bridges to Cape Cod. (*Boston Globe*)
- The Senate approves a ban on so-called revenge porn. (*Gloucester Times*)

HEALTH/HEALTH CARE

- A Weymouth man became the first sentient patient in the world to receive a pig kidney as doctors at Mass. General Hospital transplanted the organ from a genetically-modified pig into the 62-year-old state transportation worker. (PIg kidneys have previously been transplanted into brain-dead patients whose families consented to the procedure.) (*Boston Globe*)
- UMass Chan Medical School and Lahey Hospital are teaming up on a quantitative science research hub, with a focus on digital medicine. (*MassLive*)

ELECTIONS

- Former state auditor Suzanne Bump and Mary Connaughton of the Pioneer Institute (and former candidate for auditor) take opposing sides on the ballot question to audit the Legislature being pushed by current Auditor Diana DiZoglio. (*Boston Globe*)

BUSINESS/ECONOMY

- Black-owned business owners say they have been shortchanged by the way Amherst is using federal ARPA money. The business owners staged a brief protest at a Town Council meeting. (*Daily Hampshire Gazette*)
- Consumers should not purchase or drink water bottled or distributed by Easton-based Simpson Spring Company, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health has advised, due to PFAS contamination

that exceeds drinking water standards. (*MetroWest Daily News*)

EDUCATION

- Former Boston police commissioner Ed Davis, who now runs his own consulting business, has been hired to carry out a review of safety and security issues at troubled Brockton High School. (*Boston Herald*)
- The North Shore Community College Foundation receives a \$1.2 million anonymous donation. (*Salem News*)
- Three UMass Boston faculty members who are part of the Africana Studies department allege university officials have created a hostile work environment. (GBH News)

ARTS/CULTURE

- The Peabody City Council and mayor want the North Shore Children's Museum to rely less on city money. (*Daily Item*)

CRIMINAL JUSTICE/COURTS

- A federal appeals court said a lower-court judge must weigh whether two jurors in the trial of Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev were biased, opening up the possibility that Tsarnaev is in prison for life, rather than facing a death sentence. (*Universal Hub*)
- After a federal jury found that the National Association of Realtors colluded with large brokerage firms to keep commission rates high, the association agreed to keep broker compensation offers off of a popular listing website. This could have downstream effects on realtors, who may now have to negotiate their fees with individual buyers. (*Worcester Telegram*)

MEDIA

- Report for America, a nonprofit that places and pays half the salary for young journalists who work in newsrooms, says it will no longer have them work at newspapers owned by hedge funds or private equity firms. (The organization has placed a reporter at the privately-held *Boston Globe*.) (*Boston Globe*)
- It's safe to put Dan Shaughnessy down as not too taken with the Apple TV docuseries "The Dynasty" about the Patriots, which he calls "a farce" and "loathsome 10-part Kraft hagiography/Belichick hit piece." (*Boston Globe*)

PASSINGS

- Sarah-Ann Shaw, who became the first Black reporter for a Boston network-affiliate newscast when she was hired by WBZ-TV in 1969, died at age 90. (*Boston Globe*) Dan Kennedy has more. (Media Nation)

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CommonWealth Beacon
11 Beacon Street, Suite 500
Boston, MA 02108
United States

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