

2009: A look at the year's top events

Published: Sunday, December 27, 2009

Staff Report





SARATOGA SPRINGS — The past year was filled with numerous major stories — politics, a presidential visit, the economy and unfortunate tragedy.

Following is a look at some of the highlights:

GlobalFoundries breaks ground

GlobalFoundries broke ground on a new \$4.2 billion computer chip plant at Luther Forest Technology Campus, the largest economic development project currently under way in the United States.

The plant is the first tenant at the Malta site, which aims to establish Saratoga County and the Capital District as a prime location for high-tech industries.

The 1.3-million-square-foot plant will eventually employ 1,400 workers in various manufacturing and corporate jobs. The annual payroll will be about \$3 million. Additional job creation is expected both in related industries, as suppliers establish facilities in the area, and in service industries.

Some entities have projected that as many as 5,000 jobs will be created off-site, once the plant begins operating in 2011.

The plant has been hailed by politicians and development officials alike as an opportunity for New York to recapture its place as a premier manufacturing center.

“We are going to have to replace those manufacturing jobs that made New York state’s work force one of the best work forces in the country,” Gov. David Paterson said at the plant’s July groundbreaking.

Obama visits area

In a closely related story, President Barack Obama visited Hudson Valley Community College in September, touting the Capital Region's growing reputation as "Tech Valley" and the importance two-year colleges have in developing workers for such jobs.

The president was greeted by dozens of elected officials, including Paterson, several members of Congress and a variety of state and local leaders.

"It really is a validation that you are doing things that are being noticed on the worldwide stage," said Dennis Brobston, Saratoga Economic Development Corp. president. "It really puts us into the national and global spotlight."

Dredging project begins

A highly controversial PCB dredging project got under way on the Hudson River on May 15. Work crews removed almost 300,000 cubic yards of tainted sediment from areas of the river near Rogers and Griffin islands. Officials say they removed more than expected from fewer areas than planned because logging debris concealed some heavily contaminated pockets of sediment on the river bottom.

The PCBs, short for polychlorinated biphenyls — an oily substance found to be a likely carcinogen — were legally released into the river by General Electric Co.'s Fort Edward and Hudson Falls plants between 1944 and 1977. In 2002, EPA ordered GE to dredge the tainted sediment from the river and dispose of it. The project is the largest of its kind ever undertaken and is scheduled to continue through 2016.

Though officials from the Environmental Protection Agency and General Electric deemed the first season of dredging a success, there were some notable mishaps and a tragic death in November.

At several points during the summer, PCB levels recorded at in-river sampling stations exceeded EPA's 500 parts-per-trillion drinking water standard, causing dredging to stop for one or more days. In most instances, officials attributed the high levels to heavy rainfall or too many dredges working simultaneously in heavily contaminated areas of the river. The towns of Halfmoon and Waterford, both of which use the river as their main source of drinking water, switched to using water bought from Troy when dredging began. Stillwater also uses the river as a source of drinking water and did not stop when dredging began but relied on a double carbon filtering system put in place by the EPA.

In August, a dredging crew working near Rogers Island accidentally pulled a centuries-old beam from the base of Fort Edward out of the riverbank. Work immediately halted and a firm contracted by GE began an archaeological dig at the site. Within weeks, they were able to report that the beam had been part of the British fort built around 1755.

In November, an archaeologist working near Thompson Island died when the boat he was traveling in lost power and was pulled over Thompson Island Dam. Jeffrey Harbison and a colleague were both pulled into the frigid water in the late afternoon on Nov. 17. While his colleague was able to swim to shore and find help, Harbison drowned. The tragedy occurred after dredging had ended for the season; the archaeologists were part of a five-person team surveying areas scheduled to be dredged in 2011.

Dredging officially ended in October, and 2010 will be devoted to reviewing the first year's work. EPA and GE officials, along with an independent panel, will review all of the procedures used in 2009 and make recommendations about how to proceed when dredging begins again, scheduled for the spring of 2011.

Former Sen. Bruno found guilty of corruption

Former state Senate Majority Leader Joseph L. Bruno was found guilty in December on two counts of federal corruption. He was charged with using his powerful position to enhance his own personal wealth.

Bruno previously represented Saratoga County and directed tens of millions of dollars to projects throughout the Capital District, including in Saratoga Springs, such as funding for Saratoga Performing Arts Center and a new City Center expansion.

Bruno has vowed to fight charges brought against him, but prosecutors say jail time is likely.

Special election for 20th Congressional District

A March special election for U.S. representative in the 20th Congressional District became one of the most closely watched elections in recent memory, and ultimately culminated with a political newcomer, Scott Murphy, D-Glens Falls, replacing Kirsten Gillibrand in Congress.

Gillibrand, who secured her second term over Republican challenger Sandy Treadwell in November 2008, was appointed to the U.S. Senate by Gov. David Paterson in January to fill a vacancy left by Hillary Clinton, who had been named as Barack Obama's secretary of state.

Murphy, a venture capitalist, ran a hard-fought campaign against longtime State Assemblyman James Tedisco, of Glenville.

With much of the campaign focusing on the economy, Murphy called repeatedly on Tedisco to take a stance on Obama's American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, as Tedisco declined to take a position. Tedisco, on the other hand, characterized his opponent as a wealthy interloper, out of touch with the district's needs.

After the March 31 special election, the results were too close to declare a clear winner. Weeks of counting absentee ballots followed, with a razor-thin margin separating the candidates. For several days, the two candidates had exactly the same number of votes. Nearly four weeks after the election, however, with Murphy slowly gaining a lead in recounts, Tedisco conceded the race.

Murphy will serve the remainder of Gillibrand's term, and will be up for re-election in November. Tedisco, who resigned his position as minority leader in the Assembly following the election, continues to represent the 110th Assembly District.

City elections

In November's elections, city voters stated clearly that they were satisfied with most of their elected officials. Four of five members of the City Council were re-elected, along with both of the city's county supervisors.

The only new face among city leadership will be Richard Wirth, who will assume the role of Commissioner of Public Safety on Jan. 1. In his second bid for office, Wirth, a Republican, defeated Democratic opponent Kevin Connolly. The current Public Safety commissioner, Ron Kim, opted to run for mayor rather than seek a third term in the Public Safety Department.

Kim ran a campaign focused on addressing infrastructure needs in the community, and attacking incumbent Mayor Scott Johnson for advancing work on the indoor recreation center.

Upon winning his second term, Johnson said his victory was an indication that voters wanted to see fiscal conservatism.

Also winning second terms were Commissioner of Public Works Skip Scirocco and Commissioner of Finance Kenneth Ivins Jr. Commissioner of Accounts John Franck, who won a third term in an uncontested race, will now be the sole Democrat on the council.

City budget, layoffs

For the first time in its history, the city will see widespread layoffs, affecting 26 full-time employees.

The layoffs come as the result of a budget process that forced the city to reconcile the loss of \$3.6 million in state aid derived from the video lottery terminals at Saratoga Gaming and Raceway.

Cuts include seven firefighters, seven police officers and eight full-time workers from the Department of Public Works, along with other positions from across the city government and numerous part-time workers.

In addition to layoffs, Commissioner of Finance Kenneth Ivins Jr. used a 7.81 percent property tax increase and a paid parking plan, expected to bring in at least \$1.35 million in revenue to city coffers, to balance the 2010 budget.

The budget, proposed in early October, became law on Nov. 30 without the City Council's support. Under the City Charter, the commissioner of Finance's proposed comprehensive budget becomes law either if the council votes to approve it, or if the council fails to agree on another compromise.

This year, as in 2007, the council did not reach consensus, and the comprehensive budget was adopted by default on the charter-mandated deadline of Nov. 30.

Kidnapping in Spa City

A 24-year-old woman walking toward her boyfriend's house on the city's West Side late on

July 23 was attacked from behind and forced into a minivan at gunpoint in the city's first crime of its kind since the attempted abduction of a high school student in 2005.

The victim in this case was able to escape from her alleged attacker, Victor Hernandez-Perez, by jumping from the moving van after he had driven her nearly 15 miles to Howe Road in Greenfield while forcing her to undress and threatening to rape her.

Hernandez-Perez allegedly sped away that night but was apprehended three days later by a New York state trooper who recognized his van from a description provided by the victim.

Hernandez-Perez, who entered the country illegally from El Salvador about six years ago, is being held in Saratoga County Jail while awaiting his trial, scheduled to begin March 26.

In August, he pleaded not guilty to 15 separate charges.

Police and Saratoga County District Attorney James A. Murphy III have said they believe Hernandez-Perez may be affiliated with the South American gang Mara Salvatrucha, MS-13, or that the kidnapping may have been part of his initiation into the gang. Two of Hernandez-Perez's friends were arrested shortly after the kidnapping by federal immigration officials. They were also illegal immigrants, and federal officials said the men had ties to MS-13.

Former Rep. Sweeney charged with felony DWI

Former U.S. Rep. John Sweeney was charged with his second DWI April 5 after a Saratoga County sheriff's deputy pulled him over for speeding on Route 9 in Clifton Park. Sweeney was convicted of misdemeanor DWI in 2007; because the April arrest was his second offense in just two years, Sweeney, the former Rensselaer County Stop-DWI coordinator, faces a felony charge.

He was indicted by a grand jury in Saratoga County court in August. Following a court appearance, during which Sweeney pleaded not guilty to the felony DWI charge, his attorney, E. Stewart Jones, claimed Sweeney was being unfairly persecuted.

Urging the court not to use a “broad-brush, one-size-fits-all” policy in his client’s case, Jones said “people aren’t equal.”

District Attorney James A. Murphy III said Sweeney is being treated in the same way any DWI offender would be. “We don’t plea bargain with repeat offenders,” he said.

Sweeney completed an out-of-state alcohol treatment program over the summer. He was stripped of his driver’s license in October and still faces 1-1/3 to four years in state prison, probation, fines and attendance at a victim impact panel if convicted of felony DWI.

Saratoga County Court Judge Jerry Scarano has recused himself from the case, and Montgomery County Judge Guy Tomlinson will take over.

Pre-trial hearings will likely be scheduled for the beginning of 2010.

Saratoga County Sheriff’s Department faces scandal

Saratoga County Sheriff James D. Bowen was elected to his 10th term in November; he is the longest-serving sheriff in the state. He faced a challenge from former Corinth village police officer Jason Longton.

Bowen’s department did see some scandal in 2009 when deputies arrested one of their own and charged him with a sex crime and another deputy was involved in an altercation with a Little League baseball player.

Sheriff Bowen called a press conference Aug. 12 to announce that one of his deputies, Donald A. Harder, was arrested at the end of his shift Aug. 10 after a woman filed a complaint alleging that Harder forced her to perform a sex act on him during his shift.

Harder, a three-year veteran of the department, was overseeing the transfer of property when the alleged crime occurred. The victim is a 27-year-old woman whom officials say Harder knew.

He was charged with criminal sexual act, a felony, and was put in Saratoga County Jail with bail set at \$25,000 cash or \$50,000 bond. He posted bail and was released a few days later.

In December, the district attorney announced that three more women had come forward with similar allegations dating as far back as 2007. Harder was indicted on 11 counts and pleaded not guilty to all of them.

In June, another sheriff’s deputy was in the public eye following an ugly confrontation during a Little League baseball game.

During a June game, a teenage Ballston Spa baseball player was accused of intentionally hitting a Galway player with two pitches and the Galway player allegedly responded by punching the Ballston Spa player in the stomach during the post-game handshake.

The incident prompted the league’s board of directors to expel the Galway player and suspend the Galway coach, Sheriff’s Deputy Bill Marshall.

Several days after the Board’s decision, Marshall filed a criminal complaint against the Ballston Spa player, 16-year-

old Corey Hall Jr. Hall Jr. was later arrested and charged with criminal mischief and harassment.

The charges against Hall Jr. were eventually dropped following requests from Bowen and District Attorney James A. Murphy III. Hall Jr.'s record was also expunged.

Shorter ballet season at SPAC proves a success

For the first time ever, New York City Ballet's season at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center was shortened from three weeks to two. The move paid off, however, as average attendance for each performance went up significantly. SPAC introduced two new modern companies to help fill some of the void left by the ballet's shortened season. The ballet has committed to a two-week season in 2010 as well.

Once again, SPAC is ending the year with a modest surplus and is nearing final agreement on a new contract with Live Nation to book pop and rock concerts.

Ups and downs for NYRA

Saratoga Race Course attendance was down slightly, a reflection of the troubled economy. Linda Rice became the first female ever to win Saratoga's training title and filly Rachael Alexandra was the star of the 2009 meet by defeating an all-male field in the Woodward Stakes.

For New York Racing Association, the biggest news once again is what didn't happen as the state failed to select a firm to run Aqueduct Race Track's proposed racino with 4,500 video lottery terminals. NYRA is slated to get 7 percent of gaming revenues, 4 percent for capital improvements. NYRA has already outlined plans for \$100 million worth of improvements at Saratoga from new backstretch worker dorms to a new clubhouse restaurant. However, such work can't begin until Aqueduct gaming revenue becomes available.

As 2009 draws to a close, NYRA says it will run out of money by June unless a VLT operator is chosen soon, jeopardizing the spring Belmont meet — including the Belmont Stakes, the third leg of the Triple Crown — and the 2010 Saratoga meet.

H1N1 outbreak

The first outbreak of the new strain of influenza known as the swine flu hit the region in April and reached pandemic levels around the world in June.

Health and government officials scrambled to address the spread of the illness in crowded hospitals, school buildings and offices. Hand sanitizer stations quickly became a regular feature in public places and citizens were warned and nauseam to wash their hands, cover their coughs and stay home from school and work when sick.

An H1N1 vaccine arrived in October and was initially reserved for priority groups of people at high risk of getting the flu: health care workers, emergency medical services personnel, people who live with or provide care for infants and people ages 6 months to 24 years.

An uproar of opposition swept the Capitol when New York state mandated that all hospital workers get the H1N1 vaccine or be subject to losing their jobs. Four Albany Medical Center Hospital emergency room nurses said they had planned to file a lawsuit against the state.

The vaccine was made available to the general public in December, when state and federal officials directed increasing supplies of the vaccine to be distributed by county health workers.

In Saratoga County, however, the Department of Health has said its H1N1 vaccine supply will not be open to the general public until after Jan. 1, 2010, due to high demand by priority groups.

Two out of 12 school districts in the county — Saratoga Springs City School District and Ballston Spa Central School District — have received enough of the vaccine to hold flu shot clinics for students already. The county is working to supply the remaining 10 school districts after the new year.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that between 7,070 and 13,930 H1N1-related deaths occurred between April and Nov. 14, 2009.

Retirements and resignations

2009 was a year full of goodbyes from multiple leaders of community organizations and in city offices. Retirees include:

- Saratoga Springs City School District Board of Education member Aaron AuBuchon
- City Fire Chief Robert Cogan
- City Police Chief Ed Moore
- Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Joseph W. Dalton Jr.
- Prevention Council Executive Director Judy Ekman
- Shelters of Saratoga Executive Director Nancy Breen Lamb
- President of Saratoga Convention and Tourism Bureau David Zunker
- Director of Public Works William McTygue