

LOCAL NEWS

The Column: How it started, how it's going

By **STAFF REPORT**PUBLISHED: July 30, 2022 at 4:49 PM EDT

LOWELL CITY Manager Tom Golden had a very good week.

After a rough start to his, as he likes to remind people, “weeks in the job,” Golden might be finding his groove.

On Tuesday, he announced at the City Council meeting that the city had reached a deal to sell LeLacheur Park to UMass Lowell for \$1 million. The agreement capped months of negotiations, and affirmed his reputation as a deal-maker.

In March, when Golden applied for the city manager position, Councilor Rita Mercier said he had the skill set, connections and experience to make things happen for the city.

“He’s a person that would connect with the State House, he has connections there, he knows our city and knows the big projects that are going on,” Mercier said at the time. “It’s not like he’s oblivious to it, he knows it.”

Golden, 51, previously served as the 16th Middlesex District state representative and as a real estate agent for RE/MAX Innovative Properties.

The city manager certainly demonstrated his deal-making skills with his own contract negotiations, which includes a five-year agreement and a starting salary of \$235,000 per year, with cost of living adjustments and performance-based incentives.

Part of his contract may include an expense account. Prior to the council meeting, Golden was spotted taking his staff, including Assistant City Manager Shawn Machado, Chief Financial Officer Conor Baldwin and several other staffers, out to dinner at Cobblestones, right around the corner from City Hall. Perhaps they were celebrating the successful end to an arduous process to offload the aging, expensive and little-unused stadium.

Another task that Golden was charged with by the council was to rehabilitate the shabby-looking “Welcome to Lowell” sign located on the grassy slope off the cloverleaf from the Lowell Connector Highway to Thorndike Street.

Councilor Wayne Jenness made a motion in mid-July requesting the city manager explore options for improving the sign.

Although not a high-profile project in terms of revenue, the iconic sign is a gateway to the city for the estimated 150,000 visitors expected to attend the Lowell Folk Festival that opened on Friday.

Golden came through on that project. A two-man crew from the Department of Public Works Lands & Building section power-washed the more than 100-foot-long landscaped image early Friday.

Despite the hour, sweat was rolling off the shaved head of Jerry Jutras, of Methuen, as he monitored the apparatus powering the equipment his colleague, George Pilato, of Lowell, was using to clean the sign.

“We’re using the power washer to blow off the moss, dirt and grime,” Jutras, a mason with the department, explained. “It’s coming off pretty good.”

Pilato agreed. He paused the high-pressure hose to mop his brow.

“We were going to paint it, but it’s AstroTurf so we’re pressure washing it clean, and it’s looking good,” Pilato said. He is a working foreman with the Department of Public Works who can usually be found removing graffiti and doing painting projects around the city.

Pilato gave the city manager a shout-out, saying, “We’re cleaning up the city. We did the light posts downtown for the festival. The new city manager is making a great effort to try and spruce the city up.”

By email, Jenness wrote that the cleaned-up sign “looked great” and he appreciated the city manager for making that happen.

Which brings Golden to his crowning achievement of the week — [the Folk Festival](#). It seems no detail was spared in preparing the city for the return of its crown-jewel summer event, which was paused for two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Storefront windows and light posts were painted. Welcome signs were spruced up. Streets were swept and garbage cans emptied. All was readied to make the city shine.

On [Friday evening](#), at the festival’s opening parade led by the Treme Brass Band, Golden marched with Mayor Sokhary Chau from City Hall to Boarding House Park. On the festival stage, he gave a rousing speech to the gathered crowd.

“The city of Lowell is here, you are here, and we are ready to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the Lowell Folk Festival with each and every one of you,” he said.

Tom Golden, it seems, has arrived.

Fresh off residency court win, Dominik Lay begins state rep campaign

IN THE race to represent the 18th Middlesex District, a new candidate has thrown his hat in the ring less than two months before the primary in September.

Dominik Lay, a member of the Lowell School Committee and former district constituent service coordinator for state Sen. Ed Kennedy, is now the third Democratic candidate vying for the seat, running alongside 22-year-old Tara Hong and incumbent state Rep. Rady Mom. Lay officially kicked off his campaign with a fundraiser on July 21 at Captain John’s.

With a focus on helping small business owners recover from the pandemic, Lay championed a Cambodian American Scholarship at Lowell High School and said he embraces his Cambodian background to help represent the city on the School Committee.

Given his experience with voters and hearing their concerns and the issues they care about, Lay said he has the background and the dedication to best represent Lowell's interests at the state level.

"Right now, the district has been like a forgotten district, and the people are not happy," Lay said. "I hope to make the district more exciting. I hope to get the people to be together so that we can get something done."

A state representative's job is to "proactively" meet with residents, Lay said, but some of the district constituents — many of whom are struggling with unemployment or are generally hurting as a result of the pandemic — told him they "did not hear from their representative" when the goings got tough.

"I am one of the voters," he said, "and I feel that I want more from my state representative."

A graduate of the University of Vermont, Lay initially wasn't interested in a career in politics, instead applying his degree in math in different jobs across Boston. Several years ago, that changed.

"We always say, 'We want this service done, we want that thing done,'" Lay said. "But eventually, it comes to the point that we feel that we've done enough pointing fingers."

Lay said he was done pointing fingers in 2017, when he was the first Asian American to be elected to the Lowell School Committee. He served there until 2019, when he lost re-election bid, but when a vacancy opened in February 2021 after Bob Hoey resigned, Lay took the seat by default, as he had earned the next highest vote total in the election.

But before joining the committee, the city investigated claims that Lay did not live in Lowell, meaning he could not serve. The matter was taken to court, where the state Appeals Court recently defended a prior ruling that he is a Lowell resident.

Reflecting on that controversy, which clouds much of his current political reputation, Lay said there is no bad blood and that he will continue to push for change here.

"The city was just bluntly wrong, bringing it against me ... I didn't even have an issue with residency, but somehow, somebody decided to use it against me just to bring me down," Lay said. "I love the city as a whole. That's why I remain, and I want to serve."

Political aspirations brewing in Kennedy's office

INTERESTINGLY, LAY is the second person to leave Ed Kennedy's office to pursue a spot in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

Zoe Dzineku, who worked in constituent services at the State House, is running against former Lowell Mayor and City Councilor Rodney Elliott for City Manager Golden's old seat in the 16th Middlesex District. Dzineku is on a leave of absence, but Lay had to resign, because he is challenging a member of the local delegation, Kennedy said.

Kennedy said the pair's absence has "put a strain" on the office, which now must pick up the extra work. For now, it's five more weeks of stress before a full staff is back.

"I did not encourage them to do that at all," Kennedy said, of Lay's and Dzineku's candidacies. "If they asked me directly for some advice or suggestions, then I'm willing to do that and I have done that, but other than that, I have not been involved in either campaign."

The two may have a tough road ahead of them, Kennedy said, and he looks forward to seeing how things shake out.

"I think that they're both good candidates, but I think they are both in very competitive races," Kennedy said. "We'll see what happens to them in September."

Lay will face Hong and Mom in the Democratic primary on Sept. 6. All three candidates, interestingly enough, are Cambodian American, a community that makes up almost a quarter of Lowell's population.

Fresh-faced Hong outlines goals, calls out Mom as absentee state rep

TARA HONG is fresh out of UMass Lowell, where he studied political science and just graduated this year, and has worked at Lowell's Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association as the civic engagement coordinator, trying to get Khmer, Hispanic and other minority residents to vote. He launched his bid for state rep in early March.

Like Lay, Hong said he aims to improve constituent services in Lowell neighborhoods and address the lasting impacts of COVID-19. If elected, Hong said he would make himself more available and accessible by holding frequent in-district office hours and open his line to questions and concerns.

“I see problems in our community, people still need help and support, but they don’t get any help and support from our state government,” Hong said. “I don’t see my state representative coming out to help and support people in his community, so as a 22-year-old, I decided to put my name in this race. Hopefully, I have a chance to win and have the opportunity to serve the community to make it better going forward.”

As he and his campaign team canvass and meet residents, Hong said some people don’t even know that Mom is their state representative. Because of that, Hong wants to not only improve communication between the representative and constituents, but also better inform people about what the role entails.

Once establishing that, it’s onto the bigger, more pervasive problems.

“We can work together as a community to tackle issues like public education, bring more (funds) to our public school system, affordable housing, homelessness, climate change, public health, local business recovery support and so on,” he said. “One person cannot do anything alone. We need people in the community to come out and show their support as well, to make stuff change, make stuff happen in this community.”

Despite his age, Hong said he’s ready to serve. He immigrated from Cambodia in 2013, attending Stoklosa Middle School and then Lowell High School. Through his volunteering and community-oriented work, Hong said he has seen firsthand the issues residents face, and he wants to take a more active role in fixing those issues.

His campaign has also recently begun calling out his incumbent opponent on his votes in the State House. In a press release last week, Hong’s election committee called Mom’s vote against a gun bill — which was passed by the House — “unacceptable.”

“This amendment will help preserve the rules we currently have in place to assure that people who are known offenders or are suffering with a mental disorder cannot have easy access to guns or the right to carry guns in public spaces. This vote by Mom is in direct opposition to his previous proposal to impose a minimum punishment for anyone who shoots into a dwelling,” the press release states. “If you want to end gun violence, you vote for legislation that makes it more difficult for people to access weapons, not against it.”

Mom touts ‘life experience,’ hits back at Hong

MOM, who was first elected to the state representative position in 2014, said Hong’s not the right person for the job and does not have the “life experience” to adequately serve in the State House.

Mom has lived in Lowell for nearly 40 years, worked on the CMAA board of directors, serves on the board for the Angkor Dance Troupe — although he is not listed on its website — and has volunteered his time across other organizations in Lowell.

When asked for a response to Hong’s press release criticizing Mom’s “no” vote on the gun legislation bill, Mom said he defends residents’ rights to protect themselves and cited his upbringing.

“Maybe Tara Hong did not live through communism,” he said. “I did.”

Having come to America from Cambodia at a young age with no English proficiency, Mom said he has had the time and exposure that makes him the most experienced candidate on the ticket. Mom mentioned his 21-year-old son, who currently serves in the U.S. Marines, in an effort to compare him and Hong.

“I think he’s actually younger than my son,” Mom said. “One simplicity that my late father shared with me was that you don’t need a title to help people. I’ve been serving my community volunteering since 1984 to now, so it’s been quite some time.”

Mom recently helped to secure \$170 million for the Rourke Bridge construction, which he said has been a career-long goal that he’s proud to finally accomplish this term. With the pandemic, Mom said he has helped find funding for HVAC systems in schools, and he said he has also supported police in providing them the resources they need.

As the primary approaches, Mom said he hopes voters re-elect the most qualified candidate and one who has already proven himself.

“It is truly an honor and a privilege to go to the House of Representatives and serve the very people who send me there,” he said. “Right now, I don’t think we can afford a brand new elected official, especially when I’m literally the only one that has way more experience than any from the delegation of Lowell.”

Hong racks up endorsements

GETTING BACK to Tara Hong, his campaign was in press release overdrive this past week. In addition to the item criticizing Rady Mom’s vote on the gun legislation, Hong’s campaign bragged a number of endorsements for the first-time candidate by local and statewide progressive organizations.

From Solidarity Lowell, a chapter of Progressive Mass: “Tara’s platform includes a focus on adequate funding for schools, constituent services, affordable healthcare and housing, support for local business, and addressing climate change. Tara is a strong advocate for transparency in legislative work and will actively seek constituents’ opinions to help inform his decision making.”

From Progressive Mass: “He is running on a strong progressive platform, rooted in transparency, affordable housing, and bold climate action, and he is challenging an incumbent who has voted lockstep with the Speaker (if not worse, given the incumbent’s votes against police reform). Solidarity Lowell endorsed him, and we are proud to as well.”

From Incorruptible Mass, an organization focused on government transparency and holding elected officials to account: “Tara is committed to flipping the balance of power back to everyday people and will vigorously stand up for marginalized communities in Lowell. He will bring his neighbors with him as a state rep through engaged and dedicated constituent services and progressive leadership.”

From the Mass Alliance coalition: “We need a State Rep who is involved with the constituents, one who will listen to their concerns and fight for them and for everyone in Massachusetts,” Executive Director Jordan Berg Powers said. “Tara’s lived experience as an immigrant in the City of Lowell, combined with his work in nonprofits, and his advocacy for environmental issues and racial justice, make him a capable leader who will fight for all of us, especially the residents of the 18th Middlesex.”

Can Dracut selectmen agree on goals?

A ONE-ITEM agenda is on tap for Dracut Selectmen this Tuesday night. That item reads, “Review & Discuss FY23 Goals.” It would seem innocuous enough. But how the selectmen set their goals was a matter of considerable discussion at the board’s July meeting.

Selectmen set goals by providing Chair Alison Genest with what they want the board or the town manager to focus on for the next fiscal year. Genest compiles and edits the results.

Selectman Heather Santiago-Hutchings said some of her goals for fiscal 2022 did not make the final list. However, these are again on her list for the current fiscal year, which started July 1.

Among those reappearing goals are a code of conduct and a process for committee appointments.

Selectman Tony Archinski submitted a proposed code of conduct in May, but it was shot down on a 3-2 vote. Only Santiago-Hutchings voted with Archinski. Others contended that a code of conduct was unnecessary because of various other documents guiding their conduct, including the Massachusetts General Laws.

The topic of committee appointments came up earlier in the meeting under the community input session. Bruce Cote, who chairs the Community Preservation Committee and is a member of the Open Space Committee, urged selectmen to review the makeup of committees: how many have members who have served many years and how many are members of multiple committees. He would like to see committee membership expanded.

The board decided to set up a workshop or training session to try and resolve the committee appointments issue. “We can’t resolve this in a two-hour meeting,” Archinski said.

Town Counsel David DeLuca agreed with Archinski that such an event would not violate the Open Meeting Law. DeLuca told the board that he has several possibilities for speakers for a training session.

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This week’s Column was prepared by reporters Melanie Gilbert and Cameron Morsberger in Lowell; Prudence Brighton in Dracut; and Enterprise Editor Alana Melanson.

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