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Hadley officials dig into COG's finances

Select Board looks to assess returns on membership

By AMANDA DRANE
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HADLEY — Select Board members fired questions at the Hampshire Council of Governments on Wednesday, aiming to determine if the cost of membership was the

"best bang for the buck."

In the coming weeks, Select Board Chairwoman Molly Keegan said, the board will do a cost-benefit analysis of the savings and explore seeking the same services elsewhere.

"When you're entering a relationship with a partner like that, you want to make sure your partner is in good fiscal health," Keegan said.

While the financial future of the COG remains uncertain, the savings

Hadley receives by doing business with the agency are clear.

Executive Director Todd Ford brought spreadsheets that show the town saves about \$30,900 by participating in the council's bulk purchasing program.

Another area of significant savings, Town Administrator David Nixon said, comes from participating in a solar renewable energy credit program through the council. In par-

ticipating with that program, he said, the town saves 21 percent of electricity costs for five of the town's major buildings.

In return for these savings the town pays between \$3,000 and \$3,500 a year.

Select Board member Gerald Devine also stressed to Ford that the board's concerns over technology support, provided at a discount through the council's Hampshire IT

program, are "serious."

"I'm glad to hear that you had a chance to sit down and talk about it," Devine said, referencing a meeting held between Ford and Nixon on Tuesday.

Meantime, Ford brought fresh numbers from the council's auditor, which show the agency is "in the black."

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CHINESE CHARTER SCHOOL

Sides assess impact of nay vote

By SCOTT MERZBACH
Staff Writer

HADLEY — Even though an expansion of the Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School was rejected Monday by the state's Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, school officials aren't necessarily giving up on increasing the student body.

But Richard Alcorn, the executive director of the school, said in an email Tuesday that officials haven't yet decided how to proceed following the decision.

"I will be meeting with the PVCICS board of trustees later this week to discuss how to move forward," Alcorn said. "I remain optimistic we will be able to make more seats available for students who wish to come to PVCICS."

The state board, at its meeting in Malden, voted 7-2 to reject a recommendation from Commissioner Mitchell D. Chester to increase the school's enrollment by 452 students. The board approved three new charter schools, as well as expansions at four existing charter schools.

Though the Chinese language immersion school is currently 113 students below its 584-student cap, Al-

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Syrian diaspora in miniature



Ceramic figurines crafted by artist Harriet Diamond as part of her exhibit featuring the plight of Syrian refugees fleeing the ongoing Syrian civil war.

By STEVE PFARRER
Staff Writer

It's estimated that more than 400,000 people have died in the Syrian civil war, while perhaps 11 million Syrians have become refugees or been displaced within the country. Meantime, major cities like Aleppo and Homs have suffered massive destruction.

As the war enters its sixth an-

niversary this month, Northampton sculptor Harriet Diamond is unveiling an exhibit bearing witness to the tragedy. "Driven From Their Homes," which opens Thursday at the Oxbow Gallery on Pleasant Street, is a study of the Syrian diaspora in which hundreds of small figurines make their way from a bombed-out city, across a desert, to a possible escape by water.

Diamond, who spent almost two years crafting her clay figures and building their stark setting, says she's been moved by the suffering of the Syrian people and the sense that their plight has been largely

forgotten amid the rush of other news, including November's presidential election and its aftermath.

She's not alone: Her exhibit is just one part of a series of events this month sponsored by the Valley Syrian Relief Committee, a nonprofit group that raises money to assist victims of the war. The group's goal is to refocus attention on what many see as the world's greatest current humanitarian crisis.

For stories on Harriet Diamond's exhibit and other local events this month concerning Syria's civil war, turn to Page C1.

Which way on health care?

Panelists air possible impacts of Obamacare repeal

By CAITLIN ASHWORTH
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NORTHAMPTON — President Donald Trump called on Congress Tuesday to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act with reforms that expand choice, increase access, offer lower costs and provide overall better health care.

"Obamacare is collapsing, and we must act decisively to protect all Americans," Trump said.

With talk of repealing Obamacare, concern over the future of health care locally sparked a community forum on the topic Wednesday.

"The title of this event is 'Health Care and Coverage in Massachusetts: What's Next?'" organizer Deborah Levenson said to a crowd of 50 at the Northampton Friends Meetinghouse. "One thing I can tell you is we will not be able to answer that question."

But University of Massachusetts Amherst economics professor Gerald Friedman has a theory: Within two years, the ACA will be dead and insurance companies will be broke.

Friedman gained national attention last year for an analysis estimating the economic impact of programs proposed by Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders during the presidential primary season.

On Wednesday, Friedman was a panelist on the forum along with

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Sculptor Harriet Diamond depicts Syrian refugee crisis in new show

FROM C1

war," said Diamond during a recent interview in her East-hampton studio, where she was making her final preparations for the Oxbow show.

"You can see a range of emotions here — fear, sorrow, determination, courage — as people react to their lives being turned upside down," added Diamond, who spent over 20 months creating her new work. "It's a very basic response to the ugliness and inhumanity of war. People are trying to save their families."

Diamond's exhibit, which runs through March 26, is just one of a number of events taking place this month that are designed to raise awareness of the plight of Syrian refugees. The Valley Syrian Relief Committee, a local group formed to help victims of the civil war, is hosting a panel discussion, a film screening, and other activities (see sidebar).

Trying to understand

Diamond, 66, has based her previous exhibits around specific themes, like her 2013 show, "Letting the Days Go By," in which she used numerous lifesize papier-mâché models to depict family life, including her sons as they grew



GAZETTE STAFF/JOSHUA MURRAY

Artist Harriet Diamond. Diamond sculptor has a new exhibit, "Driven From Their Homes."

from boys into men.

"Driven From Their Homes" began along different lines, she notes. She had initially conceived of a show, using small figurines, that would reflect on some passages in her own life. At the same time, she was getting more and more caught up in reading about the bloodshed in Syria.

"My story just paled in comparison to this," she said. "It was so big, just impossible to take in, to really understand. I kept looking at the images [of destruction] and saying 'How can I make sense of

this?'"

Over time, the idea of depicting people forced to leave their homes took root. For Diamond, that meant sculpting, firing and painting well over a hundred figurines, some as small as three to five inches, others about 10 inches high.

These aren't detailed works. Diamond has always considered herself an expressionist, and her figures are loosely modeled, with a soft touch designed to create an overall impression.

Yet within those stylistic parameters, the exhibit has



GAZETTE STAFF/JOSHUA MURRAY

Ceramic figurines crafted by artist Harriet Diamond as part of her exhibit featuring the plight of Syrian refugees fleeing the on-going Syrian civil war.

several sharply delineated scenes. By a ruined apartment building, a man carries a dead child in his arms, his face a mask of pain. In a threadbare room with a chest of drawers, one woman seems to plead with a seated older woman to leave; outside the room, several other people are trundling away household goods piled in wheelbarrows.

Surrounding these figurines is a desolate but imaginative landscape that Diamond has constructed out of large sheets of styrofoam, which she's stained with different colors. She's fashioned

some of the material into ruined apartment towers, their facades stripped off like doll houses; rubble litters the ground, along with cocoon-like figures that represent corpses wrapped in sheets.

The scene stands in for the heavy destruction inflicted on Aleppo, which before the war was Syria's most populous city.

Other styrofoam blocks are

stained in earth tones, like the desert that covers large parts of Syria, across which Diamond's small figures walk. Some carry bundles on their heads and shoulders, or small children in their arms; others, minus a leg, limp along on crutches. A few even hold cell phones.

"That contrast, of modern technology and the way war can reduce life to just a bare struggle for survival — that really struck me," said Diamond.

A subject new and old

This isn't the first time Diamond has used her work to speak out against war. Her 2006 terra cotta and wood sculpture, "No War! From Northampton to Washington," featured tiny figurines protesting the fighting in Iraq; it was inspired by the regular protests held outside the Hampshire County Courthouse in Northampton.

And "The Pit," from 2010, showed long columns of soldiers, tanks, and trucks loaded with artillery shells

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Sculptor

FROM C2

marching down a spiraling causeway into a deep crevasse — a metaphor for the country's seemingly endless wars.

Part of the appeal of her work is the narrative it provides. At the Oxbow show, visitors will first see the end of the long line of figurines, as some climb aboard small boats (Diamond has used foil backing from her styrofoam boards to represent the ocean). The line of marching people then runs to the back of the exhibit, where the ruined homes are located.

Diamond says she sees that arrangement as somewhat akin to tracing back a person's life to his or her childhood. "I think it's more poignant to look at how someone got to a certain point in their life — what decisions did they make, or what happened to them, to bring them to where they are?"

It was just a few months ago that Diamond ran into Judson Brown of Northampton, an old friend and a member of the Syrian Relief Committee, and told him about her latest art project. After Brown viewed the work in Diamond's studio, he asked if she'd be willing to tie her exhibit to the committee's events; that was an easy decision for her.

"I'd like to think that in my own small way, I'm doing something to help people who have had this catastrophe come down on them," she said.

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GAZETTE STAFF/JOSHUA MURRAY

Ceramic figurines crafted by artist Harriet Diamond as part of her exhibit featuring the plight of Syrian refugees fleeing the on-going Syrian civil war.

A diaspora in miniature

Sculptor Harriet Diamond depicts Syrian refugee crisis in new show

By STEVE PFARRER
Staff Writer

The Syrian Civil War has been the world's bloodiest conflict over the last five years, leading by some estimates to over 400,000 deaths and perhaps 11 million refugees and displaced persons outside and within Syria.

It's a complicated struggle involving the Syrian military and an array of rebel forces, including the radical Islamic group ISIS, with geopolitical ramifications for the Middle East, Europe and Russian-American relations.

But at its heart, says Harriet Diamond, the story is a much sim-

pler one: families torn from their homes, and sometimes forced to bury their loved ones.

Diamond, a Florence sculptor, has shaped her latest project around the Syrian diaspora. Using dozens and dozens of ceramic figurines, her exhibit, "Driven From Their Homes," which opens today at Northampton's Oxbow Gallery, depicts an epic journey of people from a bombed-out city to a possible escape by water.

In between the ruined buildings and the boats that some refugees are climbing aboard, the exhibit's main section, "The Long Line," stretches 28 feet: a chain of tiny men, women and children who carry what few possessions they could save, or push them in handcarts and wheelbarrows.

"I see [the exhibit] as anti-war, in that it shows us the victims of

SEE SCULPTOR C2