

WEEKENDER EDITION

# Sullivan County Banner

Published Twice-Weekly

Vol. CXXV, No. 49, 2 Sections, 24 Pages

Friday, December 16, 2005

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**Sing It Loud**

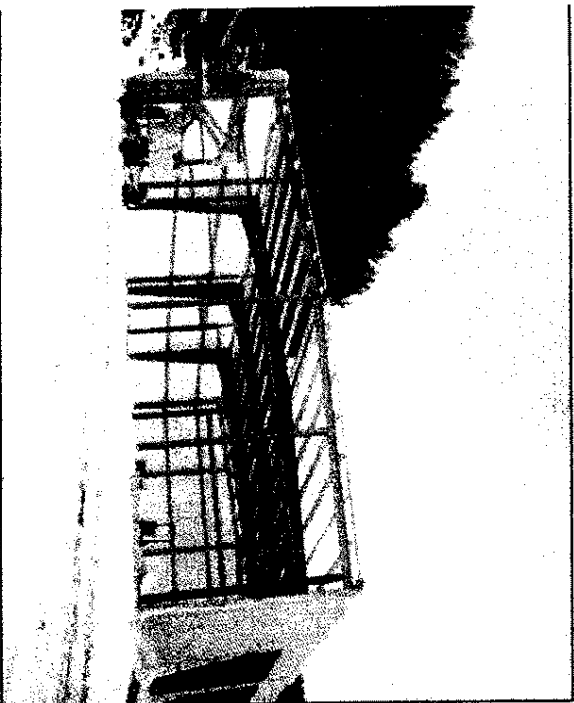
Drug Court Grads Celebrate • 2A

**Top 'Dawgs**

SW Wins Tournament • 12B

**Orators**

Find Out Who They Are • 5A



Democrat Photo by Nathan Mayberg  
New maintenance garage at the bottom of the old New Year's one.

## Mountain Ready

## 10th Year Behind

# Liberty School District Grappling With Mold

**By Nathan Mayberg**  
LIBERTY — After 13 years of complaining about moldy conditions and a leaking roof at the Liberty Middle School Library, Angela Page, the school's librarian, was able to get the federal government to document the safety hazards and issue a report on them.

Her reward?  
A unanimous decision by the Liberty Central School District Monday to force her into retirement.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, a division of the United States Department of Health and Family Services) has issued a detailed and lengthy report which identifies a host of health threats caused by mold, water leaks and damage.

Among the areas cited for mold damage were the Middle School stairwell and mural. The south side of

the school was cited for numerous water leaks around its windows. One boiler room in the elementary school was found to have water incursion. Rusty and possibly moldy blinds were located in the high school library.

The full report can be found on the Internet at [www.libertyk12.org/mold/reports.shtml](http://www.libertyk12.org/mold/reports.shtml).

According to NIOSH, the request for the report on the elementary school was initially made by the district's faculty union, but the request on the middle and high school was officially made by Superintendent Lawrence Clarke.

The list of health concerns brought by teachers included respiratory problems, allergies, asthma, rashes, sinus problems, headaches and numbness.

The issuance of the report and the word that Page would be forced to re-

tire sent over 100 parents, students, and teachers to the Board of Education meeting Monday. But most of their voices were silenced through the actions of the board, led by President David Burke. Burke limited public comment at the start of the meeting to just a few speakers. He said anybody who wished to speak about the NIOSH report must choose a representative to speak for them. A number of parents and teachers spoke out in disgust, and many walked out.

Among those who signed up to comment was Miranda Hardy, a student in the high school and the daughter of Page. When asked why she wasn't allowed to be heard, Burke told her the board was following its own procedure which allows meetings to move on and be more productive.

Although the policy was adopted. Please see **MOLD**, page 5A

# Mold...

Continued from front page

in 1999, it had rarely, if ever, been enforced, according to people who had attended meetings in the past.

"If you want to write us, you can," said Burke to those who protested his clamping down on public comment. "We're not going to have a debate on it."

"Isn't this America?" responded one woman.

And at least one person pointed out that Burke could be misinterpreting the board's own policy. The policy says that any group or organization wishing to address the board must identify a single spokesperson. He referred to some people as belonging to the NIOSH group -- although there was no such group. The same parent recommended that the board revisit its public comment policy.

Hardy was ultimately allowed to comment on her mother's forced retirement at the end of the meeting after most of the people had already left. She asked if the school had a policy on how to act if a teacher or student gets sick from mold. Clarke said there is no policy, but there is a written procedure.

Throughout the back-and-forth, there was no comment by the rest of the board.

Outside the meeting, John Buchanan voiced his displeasure with the actions.

"I am really concerned by this. This doesn't seem like democracy at all. There were a lot of people there who wanted to speak about this issue."

John Webber said, "Everyone here is a part of a community. We all want to be treated like a community."

One of the few allowed to speak was Sue Huggler, head of the union representing teachers' assistants and aides. She used to work in the coal bin room at the elementary school, which allegedly had high amounts of carbon dioxide in the air. The room is used for classrooms. She said she has suffered many respiratory problems as a result.

She called on the board to close the room as recommended by the NIOSH report.

"We have a right to a safe working environment," she said.

Gary Sawyer, the Director of Facilities for the district, was asked to give a presentation on what the school is doing to address the issues made in the report. He began in

hushed voice but was urged by the crowd to speak up. He stated that all areas where mold was identified have been cleaned up. Windows still need to be replaced, he said. Air sampling will be conducted by Sullivan County BOCES, he stated.

Sawyer admitted that there are "a lot of things we haven't gotten to yet." He said he had a limited staff which is doing the best it can. After he spoke, Sawyer attempted to leave the building but was stopped by some in the crowd who urged him to stay and answer questions. However, Sawyer never had to answer any questions from the public, as most of them were not allowed to speak.

Former Board President Philip Olsen noted the district's residents approved a \$375,000 renovation project for the middle school, which is expected to remediate a longstanding drainage issue at the school. The school was controversially built on a damp parcel which has had leaking problems since it was first constructed.

Olsen said that part of the project will replace the roof at the middle school library, which has been the focal point of Page's concerns for the last 13 years. Burke said the board will review the bids in private this Thursday.

Local resident Padme Devine asked if the public would be invited to ensure the contractor who is hired is qualified. Burke said that was not the normal practice, and there were no indications that the meeting would be opened to the public.

She also questioned whether the board was attacking the problems in the right manner. She was among those, including Page, who support the hiring of a toxicologist to handle the work.

"I am very, very concerned about the health of our kids here," Devine said.

Anthony Hibbert, who runs Perfect House -- a home consulting business which provides professional home and mold inspections, mold removal, radon and water testing services -- recommended hiring an industrial hygienist. He said there is a specific procedure in removing mold. If not followed correctly, people could become sicker, he said.

He said simply hiring an architect to make renovations, as the board had said it was doing, would not be enough. The problem could get worse, and it would only make the school pay more in the long run. Burke then said he agreed and called Hibbert's advice a very good recommendation.

Tim Hamblin, the president of the Liberty Faculty Association (the teachers' union), called the action by the board to place Page on involuntary retirement "intolerable." He said Page wasn't allowed to return to work due to the unhealthy atmosphere of her work environment. He said the board should solve the safety hazards so she can return.

He also alleged that the board had put the fear of retribution into teachers by retaliating against others who complained in the past about work conditions.

Burke defended the board's response to the matter by pointing to the \$375,000 renovation project. He said the board was the first to tackle a problem that has been ongoing for more than a decade.

"We are going to do whatever needs to be done," he said.

Clarke said the project would include roofing, chimney work, drainage work to mitigate water runoff, landscaping to protect soil from sliding into the building, and sealing windows from water leakage.

Both Burke and Clarke declined to comment on the forced retirement of Page, citing it as a personnel matter.

On Tuesday, Page said she had been told the district had submitted papers to the New York State Teachers' Retirement System for her disability retirement. The union is working on her behalf, she said.

But Page wanted to concentrate more on the health hazards she believed still remain in the school. She said the conditions in the library where she used to work were so harmful, she started fainting. Toxins from constantly breathing in the mold overwhelmed her immune system. Her system has been penetrated so deeply, she can't tolerate gas or perfume. She wears a respirator when she goes out in public. She hasn't worked in over a year.

The library was bleached, but that only made the mold grow more toxic, she said. For 13 years, the roof leaked, causing the ceiling to collapse and the rug to be replaced. Shelves fell down, books became moldy and had to be discarded. It was in the process of examining such books that Page said she was exposed most significantly.

She said there are many toxic threats in the school which need to be dealt with by professionals who deal with such chemicals.

"Our children deserve nothing less than a safe place to go to school. My issue has become secondary next to the larger health issue," she said.