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TUESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2025



Community Credit Union to vote on mega-merger

By Sophia Harris
ITEM NEWS EDITOR

PEABODY — President and CEO of Community Credit Union, Nick Sarantopoulos, and Attorney Thomas C. Demakis are urging members to vote in favor of the merger between Community Credit Union and Rockland Federal Credit Union, calling it a necessary step to expand services, strengthen long-term stability, and better serve members in a rapidly changing financial landscape.

The proposed merger has already received regulatory approval and now requires approval from a majority of voting members. A special meeting of the membership is scheduled for Jan. 21, 2026, at the credit union's Andrew Street headquarters, with mail-in ballots available for members who cannot attend in person.

Community Credit Union's current locations include 32 Central St. in Peabody, 1 Andrew St. in Lynn, and 377 Summer St. in Somerville.

"This merger is for you, our member," Board Chairman Peter Katsos said in a letter sent to members announcing the vote. "Unlike bank mergers that are designed to make money for stockholders, this merger will result in a wider variety of competitive services, products, and conveniences."

Credit union leaders said the decision was driven by growing financial and regulatory pressures on smaller institutions.

"It's a challenging environment for small credit unions because we're subject to the same regulations as large credit unions, and it costs a lot of money to comply," Demakis said. "Bigger credit unions have more resources, and that matters today."

Community Credit Union of UNION, A7



PHOTO | NICK WEINAND

River, 9, and Riley Weinand, 11, raised \$495 from shoveling driveways and walkways around their neighborhood. The funds will go to Anchor Food Pantry

Swampscott children raise \$495 for pantry

By Zach Laird
ITEM STAFF

SWAMPSCOTT — River, 9, and Riley Weinand, 11, took it upon themselves to shovel driveways and walkways around their neighborhood when it snowed Sunday. They raised \$495, which they plan to donate to Anchor Food Pantry.

"I like helping out charities and people that couldn't shovel their driveway," River said. "My favorite part was making people happy by helping shovel out their driveways."

WEINAND, A7



Mother turns to Santa for holiday cheer

By Zach Laird
ITEM STAFF

Every child and parent should be able to experience the feelings of excitement and wonder that fills everyone's heart during the countdown to Christmas morning.

A mother who wrote to Item Santa this year is looking to spread that same sense of joy to her children as the holiday approaches. Like every parent, she wants to make this year special for her kids.

She noted her struggles to reach that goal, explaining that she's currently living in a shelter and that it's been hard to find a job to support her family. This mother has three children and does all she can to support them day-to-day, but she's looking for help to make sure her kids have presents waiting for them under the Christmas tree.

"This year has been really difficult for me because I am a single mom and without

SANTA, A6



PHOTO | SEANNA CHMURA

Dancer Alanie Manzano, of Lynn, gears up for her 11th performance of "The Nutcracker."

Lynn dancer to perform 11th Nutcracker

By Jackie Manno
ITEM STAFF

LYNN — The Greater Salem Ballet Company is gearing up for its 12th annual performance of "The Nutcracker" at the Lynn Auditorium, featuring dancers from across the North Shore.

Lynn Classical High School junior Alanie Manzano has been with GSBC's Nutcracker journey for 11 out of its 12 performances. Her first year, at the age of 5, she participated in the performance as a little lamb. Now, she's leading the pack by dancing as The Marzipan Shepherdess.

MANZANO, A7

Lynnfield schools propose 4.9% budget increase

By Sophia Harris
ITEM NEWS EDITOR

LYNNFIELD — Superintendent of Schools Thomas Geary presented a proposed Fiscal Year 2027 school budget to the School Committee that calls for a 4.9% increase, emphasizing what he described as "thoughtful, strategic, and realistic growth" while remaining fiscally responsible.

"I know some people are watching just to hear the number," Geary said early in the presentation. "But it would take about a 4% increase just to maintain the district this year. We're not looking to just preserve and maintain. I want us to grow thoughtfully, strategically, and realistically."

Geary framed the budget within the district's mission and long-term planning efforts, noting that more than 30 stakeholders have participated in developing a five-year strategic plan.

BUDGET, A6



ITEM PHOTO | SPENSER HASAK

Saugus spiritual leader Michael Simons speaks about the meaning of Hanukkah while Randy-Sue Abber, vice president of the Sisterhood of Congregation Ahavas Sholom of Saugus, lights the menorah in front of Saugus Town Hall.

Saugus lights the menorah

By Elizabeth Della Piana
ITEM NEWS EDITOR

SAUGUS — The town had its menorah lighting on Monday afternoon, where Rabbi Sruly Brook from Chabad of Wakefield spoke of the importance of casting light onto the world during Hanukkah.

The ceremony began with Board of Selectmen Chair Debra Panetta, wishing everyone a Happy Hanukkah.

"The menorah has biblical origins and serves as a reminder (of) the Jewish people's enduring spirit and cultural identity," she said.

Panetta then introduced Maureen Appel of the Congregation Ahavas Sholom, stating that it is the 100th anniversary of the congregation.

HANUKKAH, A7



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Community Credit Union to vote on mega-merger

UNION
From A1

Lynn was founded in 1955 to serve immigrant and working-class residents who were underserved by traditional banks. Originally known as the Greek Community Credit Union, it later expanded its membership and changed its name as it grew into a broader community institution.

"From the start, the mission was to be community-oriented and do a lot of good for the community," Demakis said.

Sarantopoulos said the Board explored multiple merger options before unanimously selecting Rockland Federal Credit Union, citing alignment in values and long-term strategy.

"We had extensive meetings with several credit unions," he said. "We ultimately chose Rockland Federal because there was a great alignment between our values and theirs. They're very community-oriented, but they also have scale."

Rockland Federal is among the largest credit unions in Massachusetts and was recently named the state's top credit union by Forbes magazine, according to

Sarantopoulos.

The merger would give members access to improved mobile banking technology, more locations, a wider range of mortgage products, and significantly higher lending limits.

"Right now, the maximum loan we can make is \$2 million," Sarantopoulos said. "After the merger, that changes dramatically."

Technology was also cited as a major factor.

"Young generations do everything on their phones," Sarantopoulos said. "We need better technology, and that takes money and scale."

The Board, which is made up of volunteers, has unanimously recommended approval of the merger. Still, officials stressed that the final decision belongs to the membership.

"Your vote to approve this merger is very important," Katsos wrote. "The final decision is up to you."

Ballots must be returned by Jan. 21, 2026 for votes to be counted. If approved, the merger would be completed later in 2026 following administrative and operational transitions.

Sophia Harris can be reached at sophia@itemlive.com



PHOTO | NICK WEINAND

Nine-year-old Swampscott resident River Weinand shoveled driveways and walkways around his neighborhood Sunday, and raised \$495 in support of Anchor Food Pantry.

Swampscott children raise \$495 for pantry

WEINAND
From A1

Riley said getting a lot of money to help out charity was his favorite part. He added that people were very nice when they knew they were donating to the pantry.

Their father Nick Weinand explained how the idea came about. "It actually started because River wanted to raise some money to do some Christmas shopping for us, which I thought was really cute," he said. "We told him, 'Don't worry about buying us presents, but if you want to do something nice, you can raise money for Anchor Food Pantry.'"

He said the family loves Anchor Food Pantry and that it's an organization that's done a lot for the community.

Nick Weinand added that River jumped at the chance to help out and spent eight hours helping out 12 houses throughout

his neighborhood. Soon after, Riley joined him.

He said that his post on Facebook about the initiative helped grow exposure to their efforts. Soon after word began to spread, people would find them shoveling and make donations to help them along.

"I think people were being very generous... It was always to raise money for Anchor Food Pantry, and people really seem to like that organization around here," Weinand said. "They would come back inside our house every two hours with a pocket full of cash, and say, 'Dad, look at this!'"

He continued, "We try to instill in them the importance of taking care of others. In the past, they've done a hot chocolate stand to raise money for Anchor Food Pantry... It's just something that we like to do."

Zach Laird can be reached at zach@itemlive.com



ITEM PHOTO | SPENSER HASAK

Rabbi Sruly Brook, of Chabad of Wakefield, holds his daughter, Dusia, as he tries to take a selfie during Saugus' menorah lighting ceremony.

Saugus lights the menorah

HANUKKAH
From A1

"This is a holiday that celebrates the light to block out darkness. And God only knows we need it this year, especially in light of all the antisemitic activities we see, not only in this country, but in places like Australia," Appel said.

She said she hopes for peace in all the world and "light and only light, no darkness."

When the lighting of the menorah began, spiritual leader Michael Simons led everyone in prayer.

Former pastor of Clifftondale Congregational Church and Army Chaplain Bob Leroe then spoke.

"Hanukkah is not a Jewish version of Christmas. It is a separate and unique festival. And since Christians, our roots are Jewish, it's appropriate to add Hanukkah to our celebration," Leroe said.

He continued that Hanukkah meant dedication, consecration, and inauguration.

"The celebration is referred to as the festival of lights and the feast of dedication. It is a festival of spiritual renewal celebrating the power of God and the preservation of the Jewish nation," he said. "Hanukkah stands for standing up for what you believe and defending the freedom of worship."

Before the ceremony ended, Appel held a moment of silence for those who lost their lives during the Hanukkah celebration on Sunday at Bondi Beach in Australia, where two gunmen opened fire, killing at least 15 people. They also held a moment of silence for the Brown University school shooting.

Perhaps the most powerful words came from Brook, who told the story of the miracle of the

oil and the importance of shining light right now.

"We are very conflicted, and we feel conflicting emotions at the same time. On one hand, it's Hanukkah. It's the most joyous holiday of the year. On the other hand, we feel that we have just been attacked," Brook said in reference to the mass shooting at Bondi Beach. "And even though the attack happened in Australia, we all feel it deeply over here. And the emotions are confusing."

Brook said that one thing is clear from the story of Hanukkah, and it stems from when the Jewish people gathered in the Holy Temple and saw the destruction.

"What did they do? They didn't have enough oil to light for eight days. They only had enough for one day. So why couldn't they just wait the eight days until new oil came? They said, 'No, we have

an opportunity to bring light, even in the face of destruction, even when we don't know what the outcome will be. We have the responsibility, as the Jewish people, to bring light and positivity into the world," Brook said.

That oil then burned for eight days, giving time for more oil to be produced and leading to the eight-day celebration of Hanukkah.

"That's the idea as well today. We have a responsibility to do good, to bring kindness, never to fight darkness with darkness, but to fight darkness with light and to remember that every human being is created in the image of God, with a mission in this world to bring kindness and goodness to this world," he said.

Elizabeth Della Piana can be reached at elizabeth@itemlive.com

Lynn dancer to perform 11th Nutcracker

MANZANO
From A1

Manzano appreciates participating in "The Nutcracker" due to its community bonding aspect. She also enjoys exploring versatile aspects of her dancing style.

"My favorite part about being in 'The Nutcracker' is getting to play different roles with my best friends. Over the three to four months we spend practicing, I love getting to spend time with my friends on the weekend and getting the opportunity to play different roles with different styles and personalities," Manzano said.

After tackling an inflamed Achilles this year, Manzano said "getting back on pointe and back to my everyday dancing routine" has "definitely been a challenge." However, she didn't let the setback defeat her.

"I've learned as a dancer, it's important to have patience, especially when learning and teaching new things. Things come with time. It'll come eventually, (and) sometimes people need more time," she said.

Manzano reflected on her journey with GSBC after 11 years.

"I would 100% recommend having your kids do 'The Nutcracker.' I've made so many friends and gained great opportunities through dancing with the GSBC, and I'm forever grateful," she added.

GSBC studio owner Seanna Chmura, said that the company puts on "The Nutcracker" at the Lynn Auditorium to "give dance students an opportunity to perform locally in professional, quality productions while learning in a

warm, encouraging, and nurturing environment, which is greatly beneficial in the lives of children, teens, and young adults."

"Dance is a constant in their lives," Chmura said. "There is definitely something near and dear to our hearts to produce this holiday classic."

The performances of GSBC's "The Nutcracker" will be on Saturday, Dec. 20 at noon and 4 p.m. General tickets start at \$20. Tickets can be purchased at lynnauditorium.com or by calling 781-599-7469. They can also be purchased in person at the audience entrance in City Hall at show times and in Room 311 during regular City Hall hours.

The cast list is as follows:

- Professional Dancers:
 - Mamuka Kikalishvili, Nina Matiasvili
 - Clara: Olivia Meechin, Salem
 - Fritz: Maggie McHarris, Salem
 - Drosselmeyer's Assistant: Teagan Williams, Swampscott
 - Clara's Cousins: Phoebe Jones, Marblehead, Tenley Brennan, Salem
 - Tree Angel: Gabriella Croteau, Danvers
 - Gift Doll: Eve Reames, Swampscott
 - Jesters: Charlie Bloom, Salem, Nola Lima, Swampscott
 - Dancing Bear: Mia Utкина, Marblehead
 - Mouse King: Hailey Charest, Salem
 - Soldier General: Lily Sanchez, Marblehead
- Baby Mouse: Skylar Jaffe, Marblehead
- Snow Queen: Genevieve DePasquale, Salem
- Angel Princess: Grace Turner, Marblehead
- Spanish Chocolate: Taylor Hiltonen, Salem
- Arabian Coffee: Maia Hains, Swampscott
- Chinese Tea Lead: Giuliana Fazzolari, Swampscott
- Lead Peppermint: Chloe McHarris, Salem
- Trepak Russian Lead: Serafina Park, Marblehead
- Dew Drop Fairy: Adriana Meechin, Salem
- Marzipan Shepherdess: Alanie Manzano, Lynn

Jackie Manno can be reached at jackie@itemlive.com

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